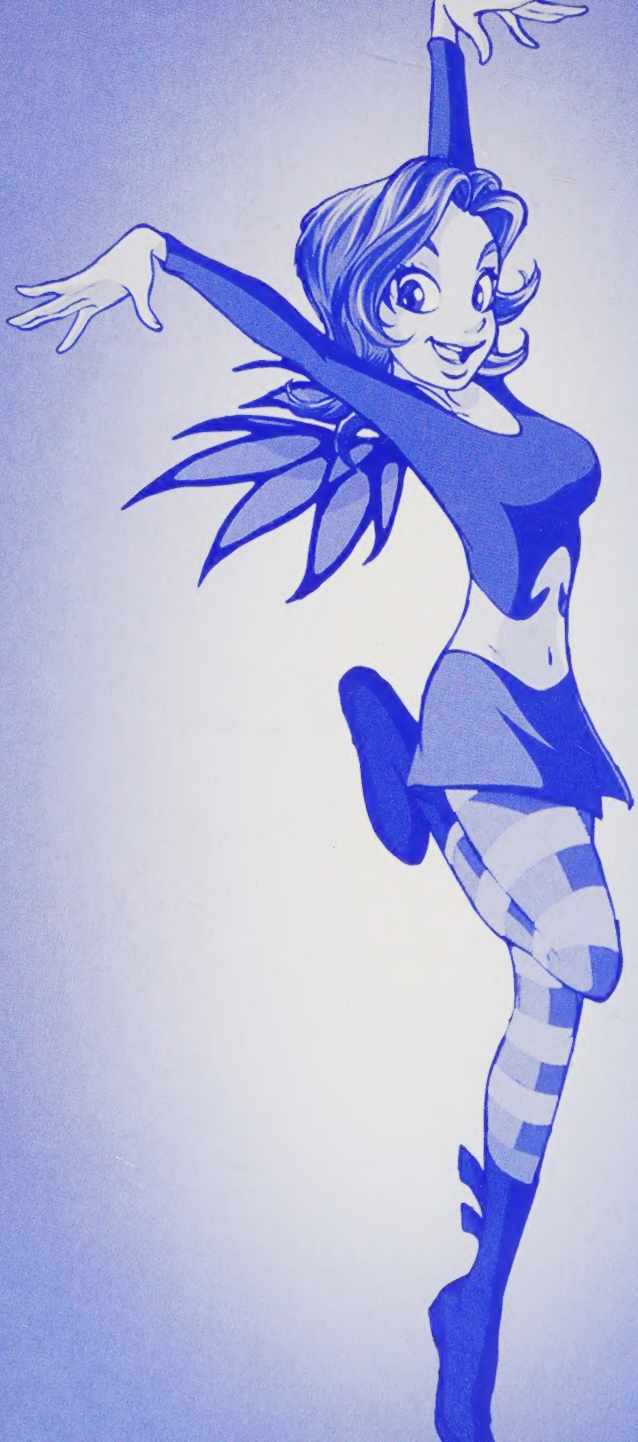
Comic inserts inside!

W.i.t.c.h.

Will Irma Taranee Cornelia Hay Lin

Guardians of the Veil

Novels 4, 5 and 6



Witch

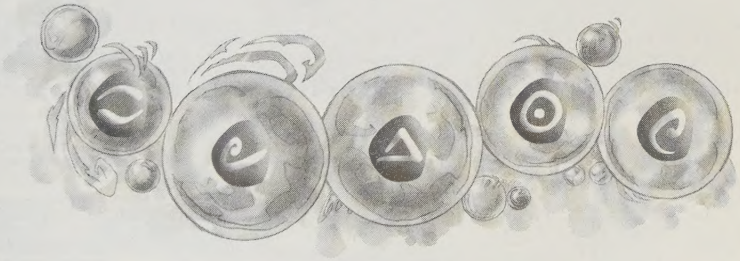
Will Irma Taranee Cornelia Hay Lin

Guardians of the Veil

The Fire of Friendship

The Last Tear

Illusions and Lies



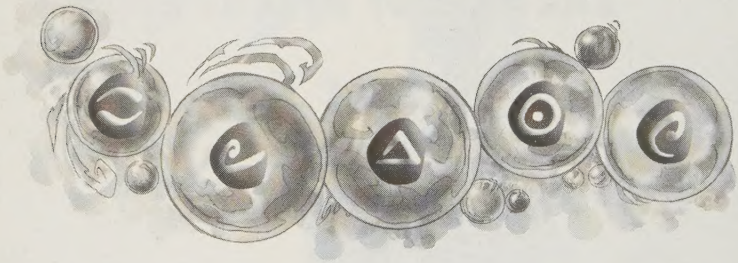
Adapted by ELIZABETH LENHARD

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

Witch

Will Irma Tarance Cornelia Hay Lin

The Fire of Friendship

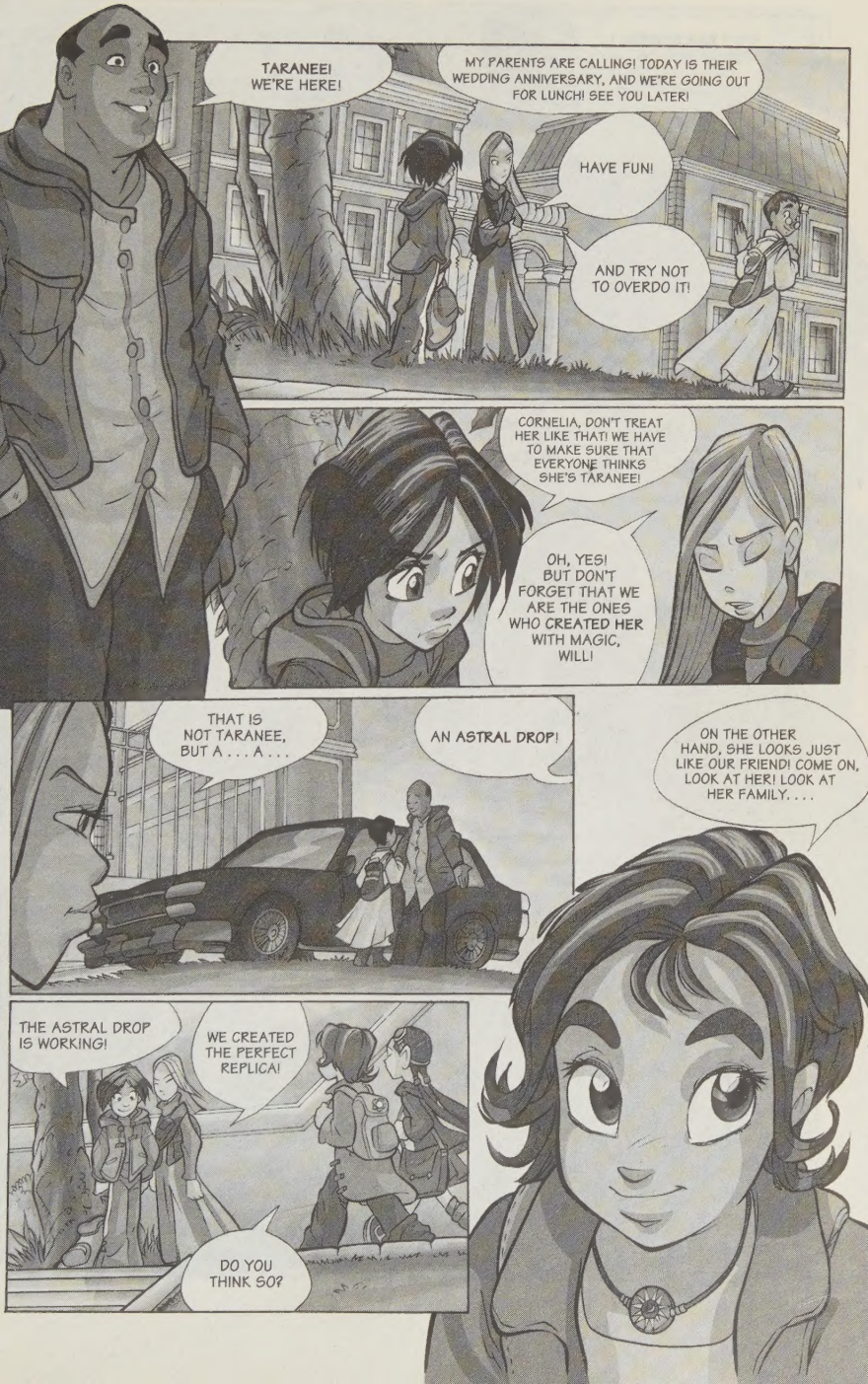


Adapted by ELIZABETH LENHARD

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

A SMILE
TARANEE SMILES AND HAY LIN CANNOT HELP OBSERVING HER.
BE QUIET, EVERYONE! LET'S CALL THE ROLL!
EVERYTHING HAPPENED LIKE A DREAM. THE DISCOVERY OF MAGIC POWERS, THE SADNESS OF HER GRANDMOTHER'S DEATH, THE TRIP TO METAMOOR . . .
BENSON!
HERE!
A REALITY THAT LETS US HEAR HER VOICE . . .
LIN!
?
IF HAY LIN HADN'T SEEN HER FRIEND TARANEE IN PRISON IN THAT MYSTERIOUS WORLD, SHE WOULD HAVE SAID THAT TARANEE WAS HERE, IN FRONT OF HER.
BUT THE REAL TARANEE HAS BEEN REPLACED BY A PERFECT TWIN. AND THIS IS NOT A DREAM, BUT REALITY.

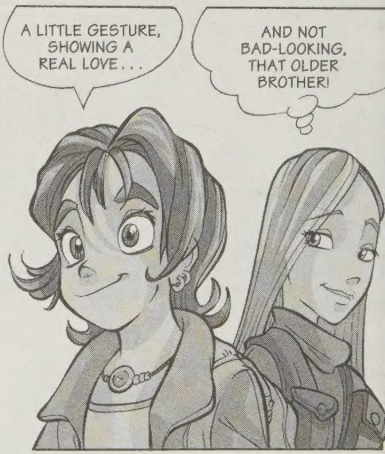
YOU ARE HAY LIN, AREN'T YOU?
OF COURSE! I'M THE ONLY ONE WITH THAT NAME! I'M UNIQUE! THE ONLY ONE!
PRESENZE
IRREPLACEABLE . . .
ALL RIGHT, 'CAUSE I'M THE UNIQUE MATHS TEACHER WHO WILL STAY WITH YOU FOR A LONG TIME!
MRS. RUDOLPH, YOUR TEACHER, IS ABSENT, AND I HAVE TO KNOW HOW MUCH YOU KNOW IN MATHS!
PRESENZE
THAT IS WHY I MUST GIVE YOU A TEST NOW!
12
13
IRMA! WHAT'S UP WITH YOU? AREN'T YOU READY?
WHEN HAVE I EVER BEEN? I'M THINKING THAT MATHS WAS SOMEONE ELSE'S FAVOURITE SUBJECT. . . .
. . . TARANEE'S . . .
12
13

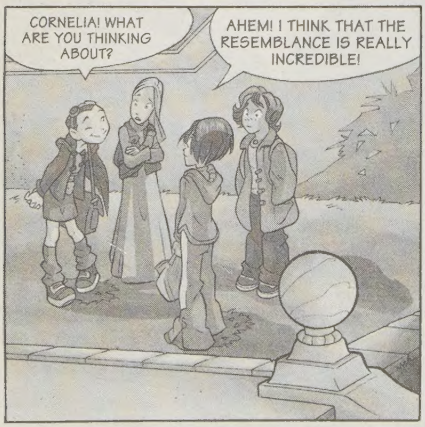

TARANEE! WE'RE HERE!
MY PARENTS ARE CALLING! TODAY IS THEIR WEDDING ANNIVERSARY, AND WE'RE GOING OUT FOR LUNCH! SEE YOU LATER!
HAVE FUN!
AND TRY NOT TO OVERDO IT!
CORNELIA, DON'T TREAT HER LIKE THAT! WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE THINKS SHE'S TARANEE!
OH, YES! BUT DON'T FORGET THAT WE ARE THE ONES WHO CREATED HER WITH MAGIC, WILL!
THAT IS NOT TARANEE, BUT A . . . A . . .
AN ASTRAL DROP!
ON THE OTHER HAND, SHE LOOKS JUST LIKE OUR FRIEND! COME ON, LOOK AT HER! LOOK AT HER FAMILY. . . .
THE ASTRAL DROP IS WORKING!
WE CREATED THE PERFECT REPLICA!
DO YOU THINK SO?

THEY SMILE, THEY TOUCH HER. . . .

. . . THEY KISS HER. . . .

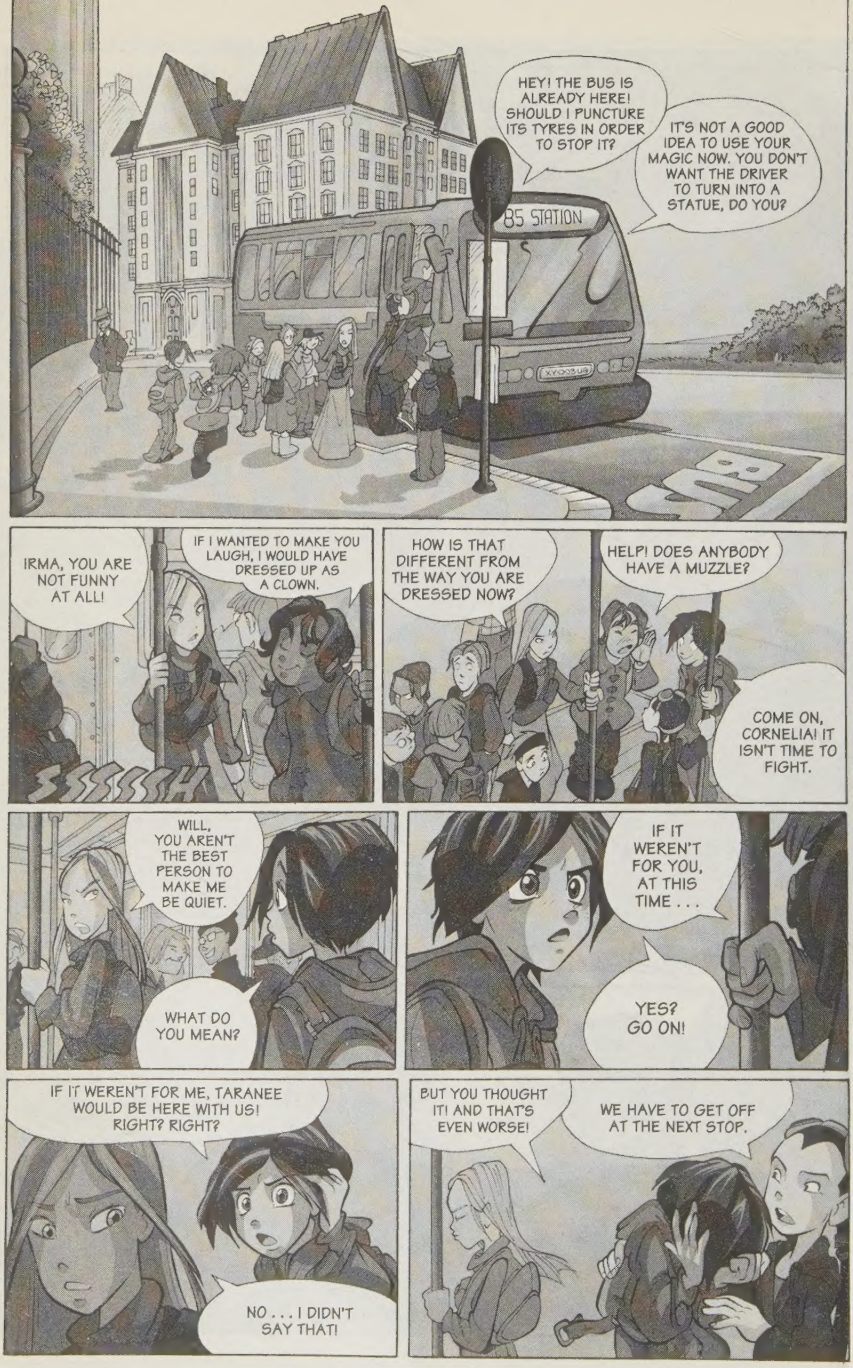
HER BROTHER OPENS THE DOOR FOR HER. . . .

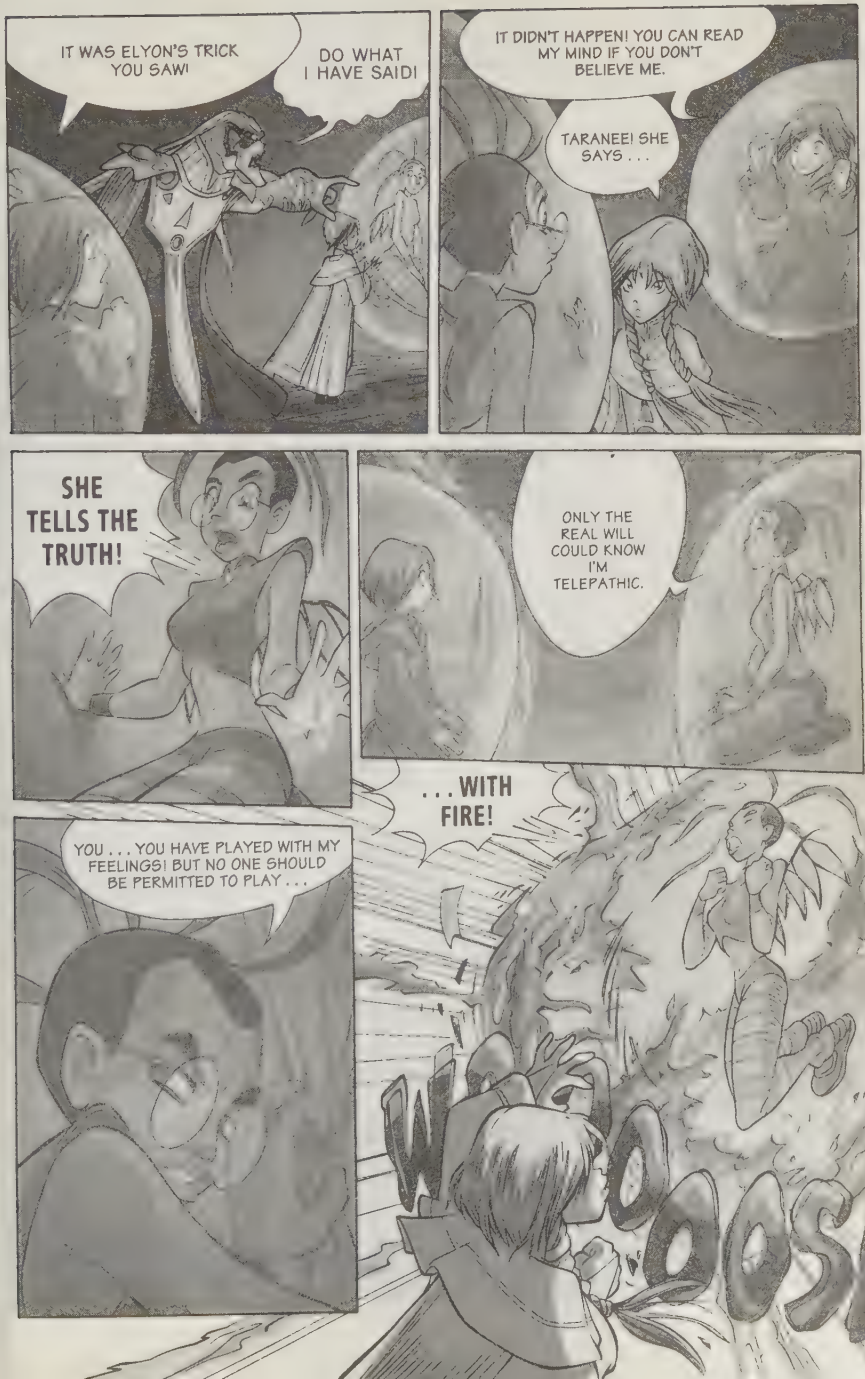

A LITTLE GESTURE, SHOWING A REAL LOVE. . .
AND NOT BAD-LOOKING, THAT OLDER BROTHER!

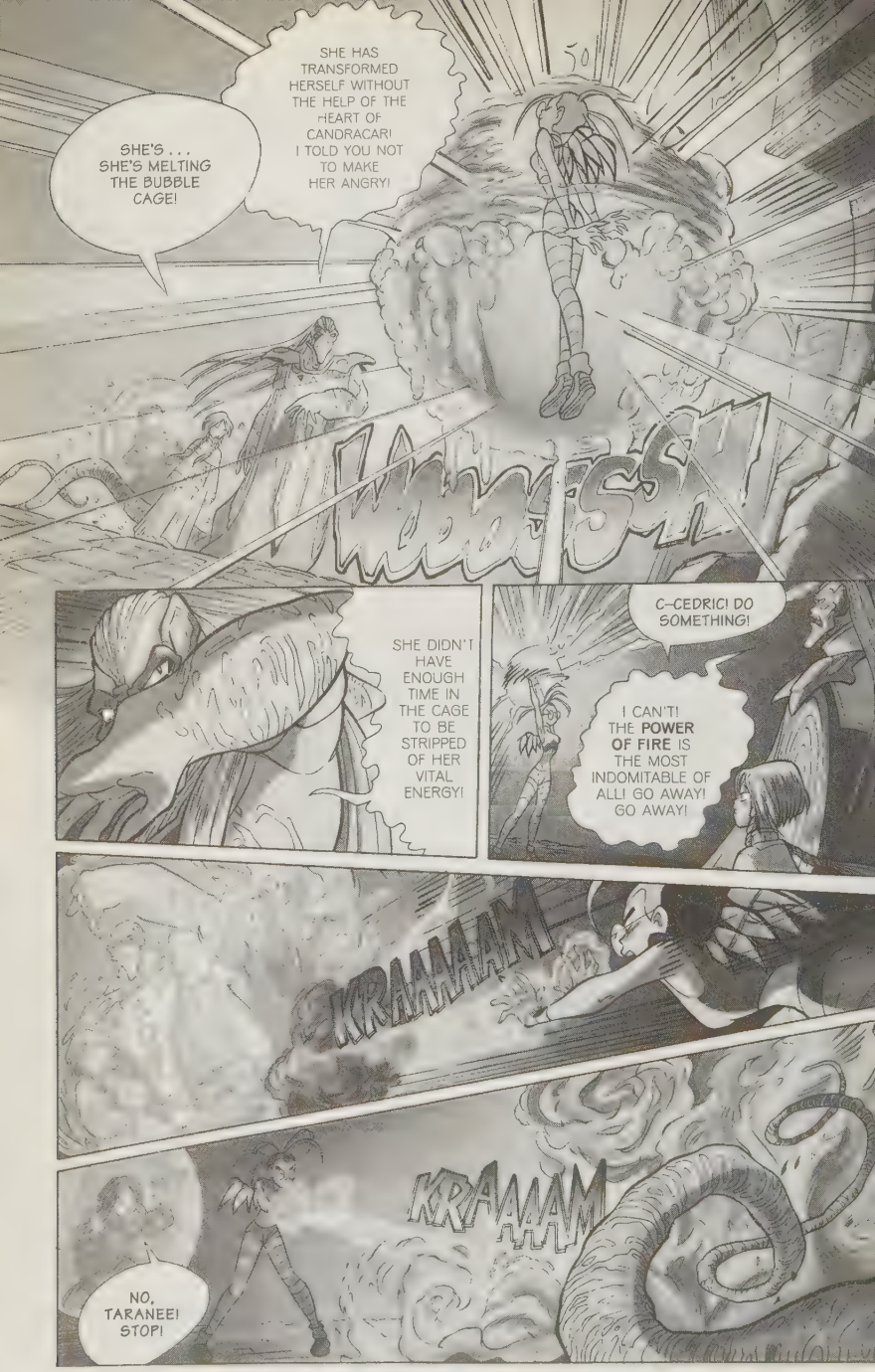

CORNELIA! WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?
AHEM! I THINK THAT THE RESEMBLANCE IS REALLY INCREDIBLE!

AND I HOPE THE TRICK DECEIVES THOSE MONSTERS IN METAMOOR.
IRMA IS RIGHT. TARANEE'S PARENTS HAVEN'T NOTICED ANYTHING!

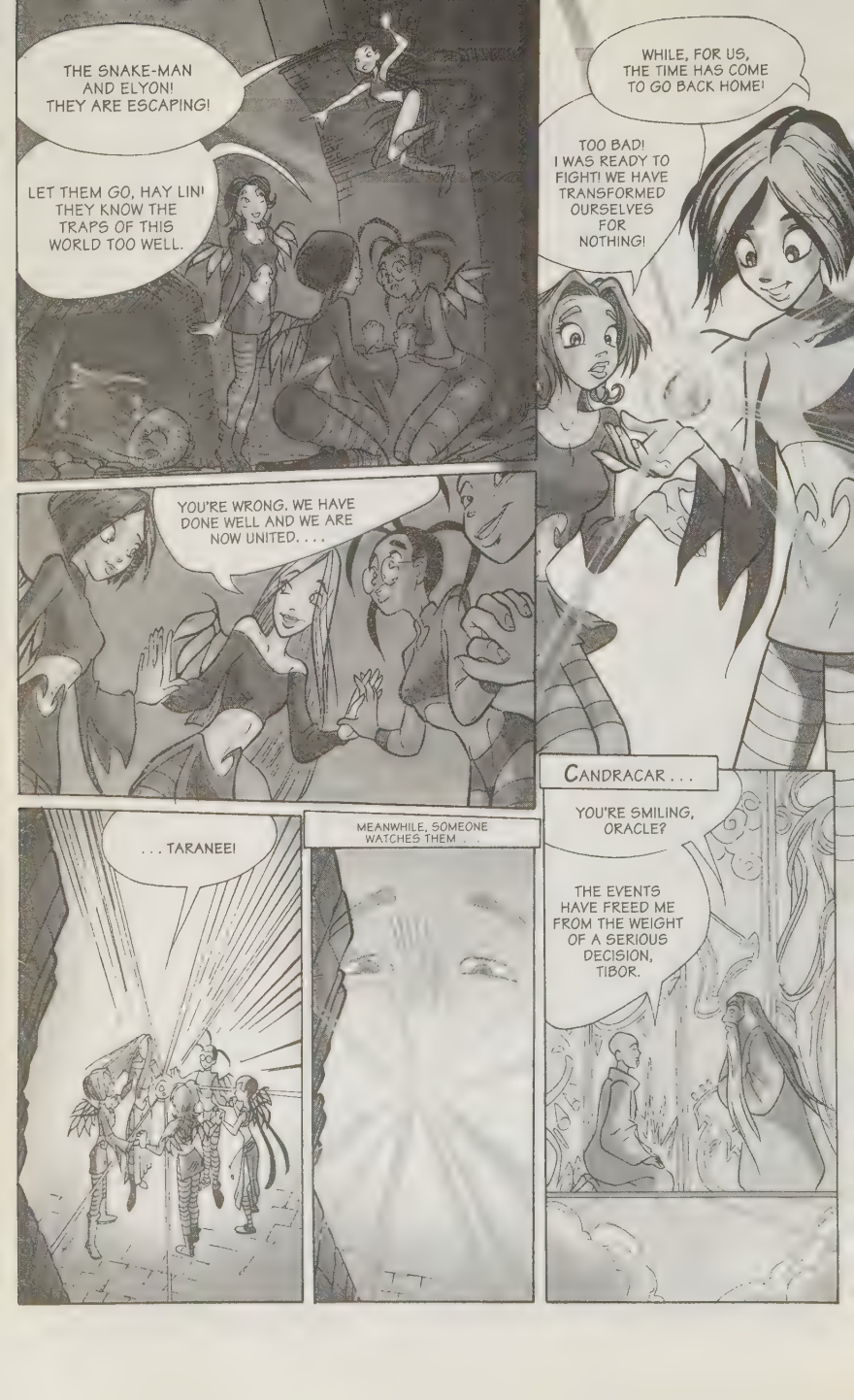
I WONDER . . .
IF AN ASTRAL DROP TOOK MY PLACE, WOULD MY MOTHER REALISE IT?
NO! ABSOLUTELY NOT!
WILL! HURRY UP!
COMING . . .


HEY! THE BUS IS ALREADY HERE! SHOULD I PUNCTURE ITS TYRES IN ORDER TO STOP IT?
IT'S NOT A GOOD IDEA TO USE YOUR MAGIC NOW. YOU DON'T WANT THE DRIVER TO TURN INTO A STATUE, DO YOU?
85 STATION
IRMA, YOU ARE NOT FUNNY AT ALL!
IF I WANTED TO MAKE YOU LAUGH, I WOULD HAVE DRESSED UP AS A CLOWN.
SSSSSH
HOW IS THAT DIFFERENT FROM THE WAY YOU ARE DRESSED NOW?
HELP! DOES ANYBODY HAVE A MUZZLE?
COME ON, CORNELIA! IT ISN'T TIME TO FIGHT.
WILL, YOU AREN'T THE BEST PERSON TO MAKE ME BE QUIET.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOU, AT THIS TIME . . .
YES? GO ON!
IF IT WEREN'T FOR ME, TARANEE WOULD BE HERE WITH US! RIGHT? RIGHT?
NO . . . I DIDN'T SAY THAT!
BUT YOU THOUGHT IT! AND THAT'S EVEN WORSE!
WE HAVE TO GET OFF AT THE NEXT STOP.

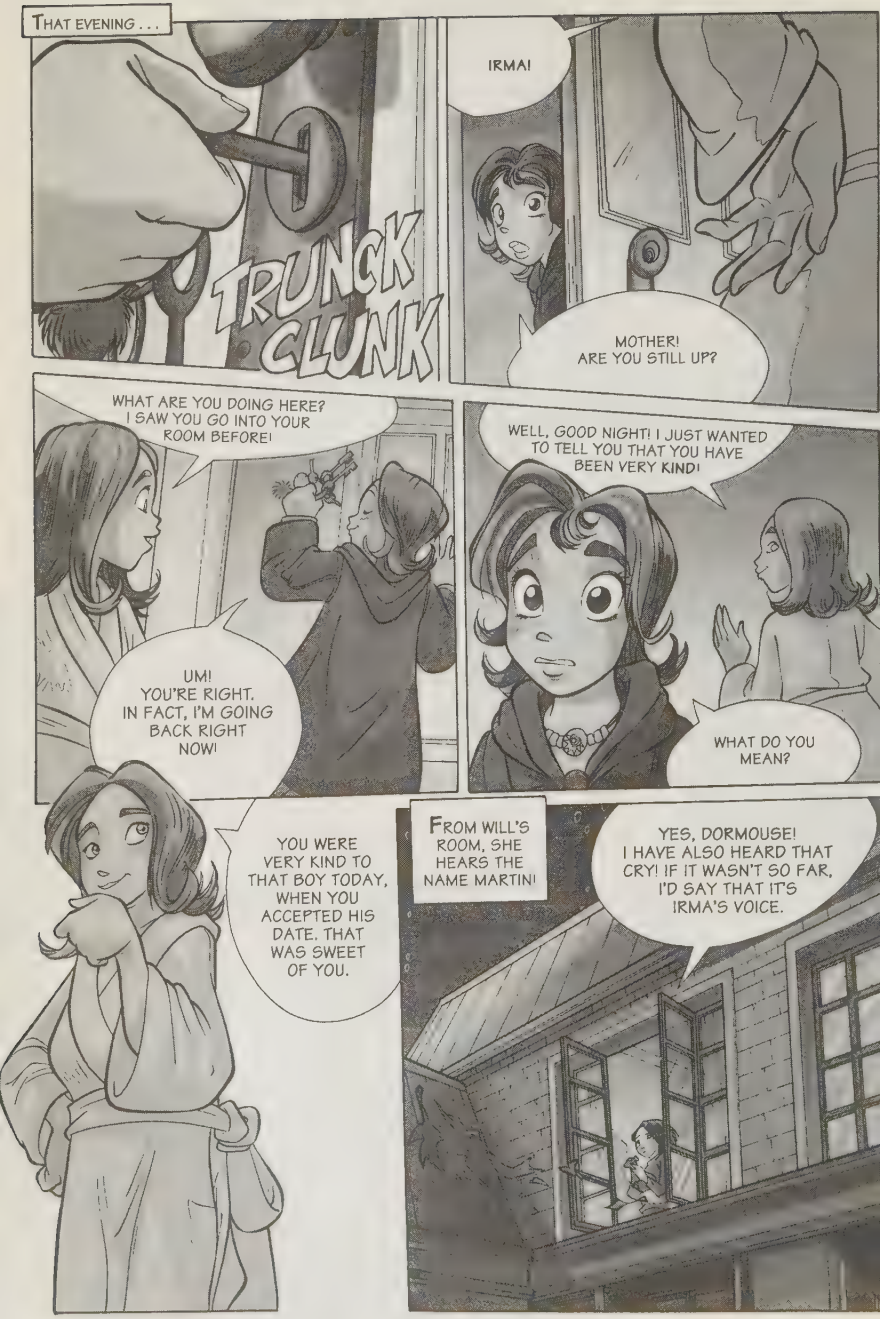

IT WAS ELYON'S TRICK YOU SAW!
DO WHAT I HAVE SAID!
IT DIDN'T HAPPEN! YOU CAN READ MY MIND IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME.
TARANEE! SHE SAYS . . .
SHE TELLS THE TRUTH!
ONLY THE REAL WILL COULD KNOW I'M TELEPATHIC.
YOU . . . YOU HAVE PLAYED WITH MY FEELINGS! BUT NO ONE SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO PLAY . . .
. . . WITH FIRE!
WOOSH


SHE'S . . . SHE'S MELTING THE BUBBLE CAGE!
SHE HAS TRANSFORMED HERSELF WITHOUT THE HELP OF THE HEART OF CANDRACAR! I TOLD YOU NOT TO MAKE HER ANGRY!
KRAAAAM
SHE DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME IN THE CAGE TO BE STRIPPED OF HER VITAL ENERGY!
C-CEDRIC! DO SOMETHING!
I CAN'T! THE **POWER OF FIRE** IS THE MOST INDOMITABLE OF ALL! GO AWAY! GO AWAY!
KRAAAAM
KRAAAAM
NO, TARANEE! STOP!

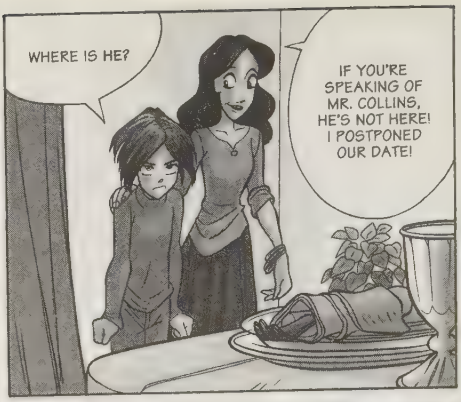
WILL! I MUST . . .
YOU MUST TRUST ME!
GIVE ME YOUR HAND . . .
I CAN NO LONGER DO ANYTHING TO STOP THEM!

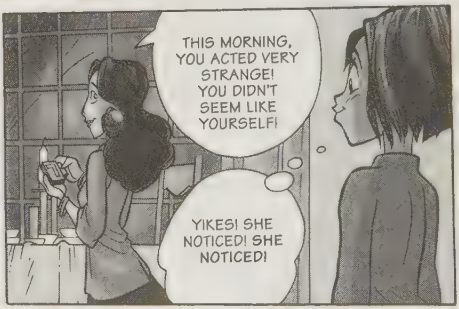

THE SNAKE-MAN AND ELYON! THEY ARE ESCAPING!
LET THEM GO, HAY LIN! THEY KNOW THE TRAPS OF THIS WORLD TOO WELL.
WHILE, FOR US, THE TIME HAS COME TO GO BACK HOME!
TOO BAD! I WAS READY TO FIGHT! WE HAVE TRANSFORMED OURSELVES FOR NOTHING!
YOU'RE WRONG. WE HAVE DONE WELL AND WE ARE NOW UNITED. . . .
CANDRACAR . . .
YOU'RE SMILING, ORACLE?
THE EVENTS HAVE FREED ME FROM THE WEIGHT OF A SERIOUS DECISION, TIBOR.
. . . TARANEE!
MEANWHILE, SOMEONE WATCHES THEM . . .

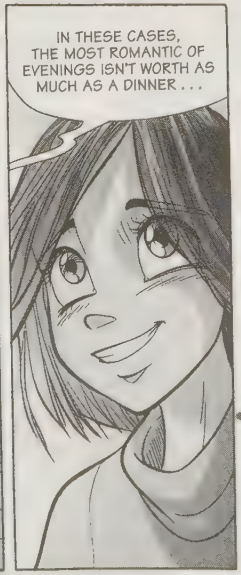
WHAT PUNISHMENT AWAITS THE GUARDIANS?
NONE! THEY HAVE SUCCEEDED IN AN IMPORTANT TRIAL, PROVING THAT THEY ARE THE CHOSEN ONES!
"BUT NOW, SILENCE! OBSERVE, WHILE THEY RETREAT BACK TO THEIR LIVES . . ."
WELL? HOW DO YOU FEEL?
I FEEL . . . FANTASTIC! REUNITING MYSELF WITH MY ASTRAL DROP, I'VE ACQUIRED ALL MY MEMORIES!
IT FEELS LIKE I'VE NEVER LEFT!
OH, TARANEE!
TARANEE! IT'S COLD! DID YOU FIND WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR IN THE GARDEN?
YES, DAD!
NOW, I HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED!


THAT EVENING . . .
TRUNCK CLUNK
IRMA!
MOTHER! ARE YOU STILL UP?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? I SAW YOU GO INTO YOUR ROOM BEFORE!
UM! YOU'RE RIGHT. IN FACT, I'M GOING BACK RIGHT NOW!
WELL, GOOD NIGHT! I JUST WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT YOU HAVE BEEN VERY KIND!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
YOU WERE VERY KIND TO THAT BOY TODAY, WHEN YOU ACCEPTED HIS DATE. THAT WAS SWEET OF YOU.
FROM WILL'S ROOM, SHE HEARS THE NAME MARTIN!
YES, DORMOUSE! I HAVE ALSO HEARD THAT CRY! IF IT WASN'T SO FAR, I'D SAY THAT IT'S IRMA'S VOICE.

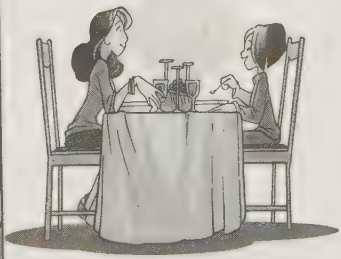
NO, I'M NOT ANGRY WITH YOU! EVEN IF YOU HAVE PRACTICALLY DEMOLISHED MY ROOM!
AT LEAST I KNOW WHAT MY ASTRAL DROP FELT WHEN IT KISSED MATT!
I JUST WISH THAT MY ASTRAL DROP HAD NOT HIT HIM IN THE MIDDLE OF SCHOOL!
STRANGE . . . MY SOCIAL LIFE IS RUINED. BUT I THINK THAT IS THE LEAST OF MY PROBLEMS. . . .
MY MOTHER IS ABOUT TO HAVE DINNER WITH THE MAN I HATE MOST! AND I REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!
WILL! ARE YOU BACK?
CAN YOU COME DOWN HERE FOR A MINUTE?







"... BETWEEN FRIENDS ..."



TO BE CONTINUED

ONE

Hay Lin clutched the bus pole so hard her knuckles went white. She looked from Cornelia to Will and back to Cornelia again. Cornelia's thin lips were pulled so taut they matched Hay Lin's knuckles. And Will's face – pale with anger and worry – fit into the colour scheme, too.

Great, just great, Hay Lin thought. When we first learned that we had magical powers, I thought it was going to add some spice to our lives. Instead, it's drained us of all our colour!

And if Hay Lin needed *anything* in her life, it was colour – in the paint she splashed on her art projects, the Magic Markers she used to scrawl impromptu ideas on her palm, and the kooky outfits she devised every morning to wear. Today, for instance, Hay Lin was a

vision of purple – purple leg warmers bunched around her ankles; lavender goggles cocked jauntily on top of her glossy, black hair; a swishy, eggplant miniskirt; and a bright fuchsia book bag.

And let's not forget the *other* colour in Hay Lin's life – the silvery swirls that burst from her palms every time she unleashed her magic. Hay Lin had power over the element of air – which meant she had an ability to make even the heaviest objects fly about like a dandelion seed on a breeze.

Her friends controlled elements, too. Cornelia's viny green, magical wisps manipulated the earth, from its soil to its leaves to its trees. Irma's shimmery blue powers were all about water. And Taranee's searing orange rays controlled fire.

As for Will, she was the keeper of the Heart of Candracar – a glass orb that shot rays of hot- pink light and transformed all five girls into superbeings. In those alternative forms, the friends were more knowing and more beautiful. They were decked out in the coolest clothes. They even had wings!

And why had Hay Lin and her four friends

– otherwise-ordinary schoolgirls at the Sheffield Institute – suddenly been infused with this magic? As Hay Lin's grandmother had explained to them right before she'd passed away, an Oracle in an ethereal place called Candracar had anointed them as Guardians of the Veil. The Veil was a barrier that this mystical, all-powerful being had placed between earth and the evil world of Metamoor. In Metamoor a snakelike villain, his lumpish, blue henchmen, and a mysterious and definitely evil prince named Phobos reigned.

At the end of every millennium, the Veil underwent a nasty change. It thinned and weakened, and even suffered some damage – tears in the supernatural fabric. Those tears had turned into a series of cosmic doorways: twelve portals. And those portals – all located somewhere in the Guardians' seaside city of Heatherfield – were direct routes to earth for the baddies of Metamoor.

That's where the Guardians came in. The Oracle had put them in charge of finding the portals and closing them with their newfound magic.

That alone is a megatask, Hay Lin thought.

But now, closing the portals isn't even at the top of our priority list! Instead, we have to focus on rescuing Taranee from Elyon.

It seemed only yesterday that Elyon had been one of them – a wispy, boy-crazy, sweet Sheffielder. But then she'd met a snaky Metamoorian who had been posing as a cute guy. The next thing the Guardians knew, Elyon had traveled through a portal to evil Metamoor and taken up residence there. Since then, she'd been doing everything she could to make sure the Guardians defected to the dark side. She'd even helped the Meridian army capture Taranee!

And that's why the remaining girls were bussing it to one of the portals to Metamoor – a magical window that had opened in the attic of Mrs. Rudolph's house.

And who is Mrs. Rudolph? Hay Lin thought drily. Oh, she's just a big, potbellied, scaly, dreadlocked, Metamoorian creature who has been masquerading as our *maths* teacher!

I mean, if anyone in our group is gonna get a kick out of creatures from another world, Hay Lin thought, it's me. I'm always up for a

tall tale. But, c'mon! An algebra-teacher-turned-ogre?! That's outrageous. Of course, on another level, it makes perfect sense! I always thought maths was a monstrous subject.

Hay Lin tried to force a grin. She even thought of telling Irma her little joke. Irma – Hay Lin's constant partner in mischief – could always be counted on for a good giggle. *Except* at this particular moment, when Cornelia was sniping at Will and Will was sobbing on Hay Lin's shoulder – and they were all minutes away from going into Mrs. Rudolph's house, marching up to her attic, and traveling through the portal to rescue Taranee.

When the bus shuddered to a halt on Mrs. Rudolph's corner, the sulky, sniffly quartet got off in silence. They tromped towards Mrs. Rudolph's imposing pink house. As they walked, Hay Lin peeked at her friends. Will's tears had dried, and she was looking angrily determined. Cornelia was intense, as always, and Irma was wide-eyed.

But for some reason, Hay Lin was feeling fuzzy. Distracted. Not quite herself.

Maybe it's the bad vibes among my friends that's got me out of whack, she thought. Or

maybe it's the fear. After all, I'm in no hurry to go back to Metamoor, where all the buildings are like dank, medieval castles, and all the inhabitants have bright blue skin or look like iguanas wearing tights and tunics.

She shuddered. Talk about creepy.

Whatever Hay Lin's yucky feeling was, it only intensified as Irma fished Mrs. Rudolph's house key out from under a planter on the front porch and unlocked the front door. It got stronger still as the girls padded up the elegant staircase to Mrs. Rudolph's top floor, then climbed the rickety stepladder into the attic.

When Will stood in front of the far wall of the attic – where the portal had opened before – and stretched out her magical hands, Hay Lin had to restrain herself from running in the opposite direction! Instead, she simply cringed.

Will closed her eyes and turned her palms upwards. From her right palm emerged a glowing spherical amulet – a clear, glass orb in an asymmetrical silver clasp. This was it. The Heart of Candracar – the unfathomable, mystical power that lived within Will's body.

The heart shimmered and pulsed with pink

light. But . . . nothing happened! The wall remained just a wall. Hay Lin unclenched her skinny shoulders and stopped squinting. Then she watched in a daze as the girls glanced at each other worriedly.

"So?" Cornelia demanded sulkily.

Will sighed and lowered her hands.

"Nothing!" she said in surprise. "The portal won't open again."

She peered into the Heart of Cańdracar.

"The Seal of Phobos isn't giving any signs of life, either," she said with a frown.

The Seal of Phobos was a green-and-white, pointy-topped symbol of all that was bad in the world. Recently, the Seal had erupted in Cornelia's bedroom, threatening to trap all of the Guardians in suffocating, black gunk. The Heart of Candracar had saved them. In fact, it had kicked the Seal's butt, absorbing it right into its own crystal sphere.

The girls didn't know exactly what the Seal meant, but they did know that it played a role in opening the portals in the Veil. They were hoping it would lead them to Metamoor.

"I guess," Irma pointed out with a shrug, "the Seal helps us leave Metamoor. But enter-

ing it is another thing altogether!"

Will clasped her fist around the Heart.

"We can't leave Taranee!" she declared. "We'll find a portal that's still open, and we'll cross through there! Are you with me?"

She shot desperate looks at her companions. Cornelia nodded in sullen assent. Irma, on the other hand, was practically jumping with eagerness.

"No need to ask me!" she said. "I'm so there."

Then Irma turned to Hay Lin.

"Have you got the map of the portals?" she asked.

Hay Lin nodded slowly. Just the mention of the dusty, highly detailed map – which was slowly revealing the sites of Heatherfield's portals – made Hay Lin feel sad and heavy. After all, that map had been her grandmother's last gift to her before she had died. With it, she'd revealed to Hay Lin that she had once been a Guardian herself.

She had passed her legacy on to Hay Lin, and she had peacefully, happily returned to Candracar – leaving Hay Lin to fight this battle with only her friends for help.

Hay Lin suddenly felt limp with fatigue. In fact, she felt . . . somehow . . . compelled to get out of the attic altogether! Hay Lin knew it was crucial that they find another portal on the magical map. After all, every minute they waited was another minute Taranee had to stay in some Metamoorian prison. But at that moment, none of that mattered. Hay Lin *had* to get out of there. So she reached into her book bag and pulled out the map. Its rough parchment felt dusty and dry in her hand. She gave the scroll to Will and said, "Here it is. But I'm leaving this one to you. I . . . I have to go."

As if in a trance, Hay Lin turned and crossed the wide attic floor. She was vaguely aware of her friends' curious stares boring into her back. Dimly, she heard Cornelia say, "What's up with her?"

"Dunno," Irma replied, "She's been acting a little weird ever since we got here."

The sound of Will's voice cut in. It was filled with awe.

"Look, you guys!" she cried. "The Heart of Candracar is showing us the way to the next portal. . . ."

Hay Lin knew that the Heart must have risen out of Will's hand and drifted to a spot on the Heatherfield map. Now that spot would be glowing bright pink – a sign that a portal could be found there.

Hay Lin also knew that she, too, should have been curious about the portal's location. She should have dashed back across the attic to check out the sitch. But *something* was drawing her down the steps, and she was powerless to resist it.

She drifted down the attic's ladder and headed toward the main stairwell.

With each step, Hay Lin felt lighter – more floaty. She was barely aware that she was walking at all. In fact, she wasn't!

My element is air, she thought, with her eyes closed. It's carrying me somewhere; telling me something. If Grandmother were here, I know just what she would say: "Be still, my little Hay Lin. Be still . . . and listen!"

So, when silvery magic began swooping around her, drawing her towards a little table in the front hall, Hay Lin didn't resist. She followed the silvery swirls. They began to flutter around an object on the table – a gold-paint-

ed, ceramic urn of some sort. It was round and squat, with an ornate, domed lid.

Hay Lin picked the urn up. She saw a tiny windup key sticking out of its side. The top of the urn was attached to the body with little hinges.

"I know what this is," Hay Lin murmured softly. "It's a music box."

Eyes wide with curiosity, she tipped the lid. She was right. A little song began to chime. It was as ethereal as an angel's voice. The tune was utterly foreign to Hay Lin, yet it was spellbinding.

Even more fascinating than the music was the tiny, porcelain figure inside the box. It was a young girl in a ballerina's dress. She had feathery wings that looked remarkably like the Guardians', and a benevolent expression etched on her tiny face. Her arms were outstretched, and one leg was pointed behind her. She was a fairy, poised for flight.

How odd, Hay Lin thought dreamily as she watched the little figure twirl to the lilting music. I've never heard this song before, but it reminds me of something. . . .

Suddenly, images flooded into Hay Lin's

head: Ghostly beings. Frantic movement. Flight.

Hay Lin closed her eyes, and the picture grew clearer. In a wash of silver light, she made out two figures, both cloaked in hooded, brown robes.

One looked like . . . Mrs. Rudolph! The Metamoorian Mrs. Rudolph anyway, with her ropy dreadlocks, red horns dotting her thick neck, floppy ears, and squashy snout.

The other person looked more like a human female. She was thin and wiry, the skin on her face pulled taut with anguish. Her hair erupted from beneath her hood, flying around her head in frantic tendrils. She looked terrified.

Perhaps . . . Hay Lin thought hazily, she's scared of losing that bundle she holds so tightly. She's cradling it as if it's something sacred. It's . . . it's . . .

Hay Lin frowned as the fuzzy image of the bundle became clearer.

It's . . . Hay Lin realised suddenly – it's a baby!

The baby was beautiful. She had fair skin and pouty lips. Her wide-set, pale-blue eyes seemed to look out at the world with a sad

sense of some deeper knowledge.

In fact, the baby seemed even to regard Hay Lin – who was gazing down into this daydream – with calm recognition. And the eerie thing was, Hay Lin felt that she knew the infant, too! The familiarity hit her with a jolt.

In fact, it threw her off balance! As she stumbled forward, her eyes popped open, and the music box flew from her hands.

"Oh!" she squealed, as the pretty box fell to the floor with a crash. It broke into a dozen pieces. The golden dancer's arm broke off at the elbow. But its sweet, smiling face remained intact.

Hay Lin stared at the little figure for a moment. The pounding of her friends' feet on the stairs jolted her from her reverie.

"Hay Lin!" Will cried. "Is everything all right?"

As Hay Lin looked up at her friends, the fog in her head quickly dissipated. Her thoughts began rushing in faster and clearer now.

"I . . . I think it is! The song that came out of that music box . . . " Hay Lin began, pointing at the shards at her feet. "It made me remember something!"

"So?" Irma said gently. "A lot of songs remind us of things that have happened to us."

"Yeah, but this song – I'd never heard it before," Hay Lin cried. "The memory – it wasn't mine! I saw these creatures crossing through the portal in the attic. I could feel their fear! And I saw the face of a little girl – a face I would know anywhere!"

"Hay Lin," Will said, grabbing Hay Lin's hand. "Maybe you've just discovered a new power!"

"Do you mean to say," Cornelia asked, planting her hands on her hips skeptically, "that she sees the memories of others by listening to their favourite music?"

"Right," Will said. "And that music box there belonged to Mrs. Rudolph!"

"Exactly," Irma said, stepping forward and nudging a piece of the box with her sneakered toe. "Mrs. Rudolph comes from Metamoor. Obviously, Hay Lin saw what happened the day she arrived here in Heatherfield."

Hay Lin sighed, feeling a big weight lift from her shoulders. She had a new power! And what's more, her friends understood her

new power. They didn't balk in disbelief. They didn't fight against the magic, just because it was foreign and weird. After all they'd been through – from having conversations with Will's talking appliances to visiting Metamoor – they were taking this latest development in stride.

This can only help us in our fight against the Metamoorians, Hay Lin thought gleefully.

A moment later, she turned the phrase over in her head again: *our fight against the Metamoorians*. Then her joy evaporated as quickly as it had materialised.

If I've learned anything, Hay Lin thought wearily, it's that no security lasts for long when you're a Guardian of the Veil.

She looked at her friends with somber eyes.

"If what you're saying is true," she said to Irma, "that I've just recalled Mrs. Rudolph's arrival here on earth, then I wonder – why was she so scared? And what was she escaping from? Because whatever it is, we're bound to face it, too!"

TWO

With her fellow Guardians, Irma slipped out of Mrs. Rudolph's house and tiptoed across the porch. She glanced around apprehensively as she slipped the key back under its planter.

We can't let anyone see that we've basically broken into Mrs. Rudolph's house, she thought breathlessly. I can just see the headline in tomorrow morning's paper: "Police Sergeant's Daughter Arrested for Breaking and Entering."

Forget about saving the world after that, Irma thought with a shudder. I'd be so grounded, I'd forget what the world *looks* like.

As soon as the girls had gone down the walk and through Mrs. Rudolph's gate, Irma sighed with relief. A moment later, she felt a familiar

sense of pleasure come over her. She giggled softly. *Nothing* beat the rush of getting away with something!

With a burst of energy, she turned to Hay Lin, Cornelia, and Will.

"Are we still meeting at the shell cave at eight?" Irma asked.

"The shell cave?" Hay Lin asked, with wide eyes. "That big old cavern where we used to hide when we were kids? Why aré we going there?"

"Oh, right," Will said. "You were downstairs when the Heart of Candracar showed us the site of the next portal – it's in the shell cave."

"Cool," Hay Lin said. She took the portal map back from Will and stuffed it into her book bag. "It'll be nice to go somewhere where we don't have to pick a lock! All this breaking and entering makes me nervous."

"Tscha!" Irma said with a vigorous nod. "Let's head home and change into more suitable gear. We'll meet up in a little bit."

Irma turned to Will and Cornelia. They both lived in the opposite direction from Irma's and Hay Lin's homes.

"See you soon!" Irma said, smiling and waving goodbye to them.

"Yup," Cornelia said grimly. "Don't be late, Irma."

"Am I ever?" Irma asked challengingly.

"Um, only all the time," Cornelia retorted.

Irma was just about to get good and mad when she felt Hay Lin's little hand on her shoulder.

"No fighting," she declared. "And besides, Cornelia's right, Irma. You *are* always late."

Irma frowned for a moment and then shrugged.

"You're right," she said with a grin. "I admit it. But this time, I won't be. I promise. We're doing this for Taranee. I won't let her down!"

Will shot Irma a grateful smile, and then the girls parted. As Hay Lin and Irma tromped through the cool, autumn breeze towards Irma's butter-yellow house, Hay Lin glanced at her.

"Where did you tell your parents you were," she asked, "while we were at Mrs. Rudolph's?"

"At your place, of course," Irma responded with a grin. "I told them we were eating at your

parents' Chinese restaurant. So make sure you cover for me if you have to."

Hay Lin nodded with a grin. But as the girls stopped at the bottom of Irma's driveway, Irma crossed her hands over her stomach and frowned.

"There's only one problem with my master scheme," she said. "We *didn't* actually eat dinner, and I'm still hungry. I'm going to have to raid the fridge before I head out."

"Good plan," Hay Lin said, turning to continue down the street towards the Silver Dragon. She lived with her parents in a cosy apartment above the family restaurant. "See you later, *you know where*!"

"Count on it," Irma said as she fished her house keys out of her book bag. Then she tiptoed up the path behind her house. All she had to do was slip silently through the kitchen door, grab some grub, and dash upstairs to change.

I really hope nobody's around, she thought as she gently turned her key in the lock and eased open the kitchen door. The last thing I want to do is answer any awkward questions, such as . . .

"Where have you been!?"

Yeah, such as that! Irma thought with a grimace. Then she peeked guiltily around the door. Yup! There was her mum, blocking her path, a clenched fist on each hip.

Irma felt her cheeks go hot. But she tried to give her mum one of her usual, cocky grins.

"I've been . . ." she began.

"I called Hay Lin's restaurant," Mum cut in with an arched eyebrow. "They told me you weren't there."

"Of course not, Mum," Irma said with a shrug. "Because . . . we got the food to go! Then we went over to Will's to eat."

Good save! Irma told herself with a smile. Triumphantly, she shrugged herself out of her jacket and headed for the stairs. She'd change first and cop some chow from the kitchen when the coast was clear. She was halfway up the steps, with visions of her favourite pink sweatshirt in her head, when her mother's voice stopped her cold.

"Don't run off, Miss Always-Ready-With-An-Answer." Mum called to her, from the foyer at the base of the stairs. Irma felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

So close to escape, she thought in anguish, yet so far! What did I do wrong? Maybe Mum called Will's house, too? So she knows we weren't there like I told her!

Irma's creative juices were frantically churning to come up with a new story, when she saw her mother . . . *smile* at her. And then something even more miraculous happened.

"There's a surprise for you in the living room," Mum announced.

"Really?!" Irma shrieked. "I mean, uh," she said more quietly, "really?" She ran a calming hand over her tousled brown hair and admonished herself: Cool it. Act too relieved, and Mum will *know* something's up.

So, with faux casualness, Irma added, "Is this surprise, say, something to eat?"

That's when Christopher poked his head into the foyer. As usual, Irma gazed at her unkempt little brother. He responded with a gap-toothed grin and a taunting hint: "Naw, this guy is too big to eat!"

Then, with a wicked and mischievous cackle, Christopher turned on his heel and ran back into the living room.

Irma's feet remained rooted to her spot on

the steps – probably because, at the mention of a certain word, her legs had lapsed into a state of sudden and absolute paralysis.

Guy.

Guy?!?

Irma began frantically smoothing down her wind-ruffled hair as she tried to imagine what guy could possibly be camped out in her living room. The living room of her very house.

Was it Ulysses Sherman – the boy she'd been crushing on ever since he'd waltzed into her biology class earlier in the year? Or maybe it was Joshua Anderson. Irma *thought* she'd seen him shoot her a flirty look in the cafeteria yesterday. Okay, maybe he'd just been eyeing the chocolate cupcakes on Irma's lunch tray, but . . .

Suddenly Irma gasped.

Maybe it was Hank Dubrovnik – the quarterback of the Sheffield football team! He was two years older than Irma. He had shiny, black hair and sparkly, green eyes and a chin dusted with stubble. He also had no idea Irma was alive.

But what the heck, Irma thought with a hopeful shrug. If I can have magical powers,

anything's possible, right?

Irma pasted her most flirtatious smile onto her lips, smoothed her pink sweater over her hips, and headed for the living-room door.

"Hi . . ." she said, catching sight of the boy on the couch. But that was the last word she was able to choke out.

Guy?! That showed how much Christopher knew! This was no guy! This was . . . Martin Tubbs! Skinny, geeky, and oh-só-annoying Martin Tubbs. He was everywhere Irma turned, waggling his shaggy blond eyebrows at her. Asking her out on a date. Or just salivating in her presence. Awful, awful–

"Martin!" Irma snarled with a curled lip.

"Oh, yeah," Christopher piped up. He was sitting on a chair next to the couch, grinning at a spiral-bound notebook in his lap. "That was his name."

Irma ignored her pesky brother and stormed over to the couch. Martin jumped to his feet and gave her one of his trademark, goofy grins. Then he proudly tweaked a blue kerchief tied around his neck.

"How did you get in here?" Irma demanded. "And why are you dressed like that?"

In addition to his strange neck gear, Martin was wearing an army-green shirt with shiny brass buttons and epaulets. He also wore green cargo shorts, blue, woolly socks, and hiking boots.

Martin nodded at Irma's father, who was standing behind the couch, straightening his tie as he got ready for the night shift.

"Hi, honey," Dad said to Irma with a wave. "Nice young man, this Martin."

"Thanks, Sergeant Lair," Martin piped up. Then he planted his swooning gaze back upon Irma.

"In answer to your questions," he said, "your father let me in. And I'm dressed like this because I'm an Explorer Scout. Our troop is called the Happy Bears. In fact, I brought you a Happy Bears calendar!"

Martin pointed to the green notebook in Christopher's grimy little paws.

"Normally, we charge for those calendars," he said, turning back to Irma with a gooey smile. "But for you – it's a present."

Oh. My. God, Irma thought queasily. This moment could not get any more disgusting.

"Hey, look!" Christopher declared from

behind Martin. He was grinning at one of the calendar pages. "This month, there's a picture of two lovebirds in here!"

Oh. My. God, Irma thought again. I was wrong!

She ignored her brother and continued to glare at Martin.

"Spit it out, Martin," she said. "If you don't want money for that calendar, what *do* you want?"

"Well . . ." Martin said, clasping his hands hopefully. "Now that you mention it, some of the other Bears and I are getting together tonight to look at slides from our last camping trip. Would you . . . care to join us?"

Irma could feel a tingling in her fingertips. She recognised that feeling. It was her magic, bristling to get out. It wanted to whip up a quick little tidal wave to wash Martin from the room. Or maybe a black cloud that would follow him all the way home? Or . . .

Suddenly, Irma shook her head and pressed her tingling fingers into her palms.

Don't do this again, she warned herself.

After all, Irma's magic had gotten her into trouble before. At the Sheffield Halloween

party, for instance, when she'd told Martin to disappear, he actually *had*. The guy had become invisible for a full hour.

Then, when a boy named Andrew Hornby had gotten a little too touchy-feely with Irma on a date, she'd turned him into a toad! She and the other Guardians had had to spend an entire afternoon in the Heatherfield nature preserve searching for the warty little varmint so that they could turn him back into a person.

A toad named Martin was sounding pretty good to Irma right about now. But she didn't have time to deal with the fallout. Not when Taranee and the other Guardians were counting on her.

So with her fists still clenched and her jaw practically grinding with the effort, Irma smiled at Martin. Then she said, softly, and as nicely as possible, "No, thank you!"

"But – but, it will be a lot of fun," Martin protested.

"Uh-huh," Irma said. She grabbed Martin's shoulders and spun him around. She started shoving him towards the front door.

"We've got a musical group, too!" Martin said desperately.

"Oh, I think I've heard of them," Irma cracked rudely as she gave Martin one last shove that sent him tripping out onto the front porch. "The Bear Growls, right?"

Martin opened his mouth to respond, but before he could utter a word, Irma slammed the door in his face.

She spun around and leaned back against the door, huffing with frustration. It didn't help that her parents were standing in the hallway, regarding her with giggly smiles.

"I don't know why you don't like him," Dad said, pulling on his police officer's coat. "A man in uniform is pretty dashing. At least, your mother seems to think so!"

Mum handed Dad his officer's cap with a smirk.

"Maybe a few sizes ago," she teased as she playfully eyed his round belly.

"Ha-ha-ha!" Irma chortled. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Christopher sidle out of the living room.

"And you!" she barked, running towards him. "'This month there's a picture of two lovebirds'!? What were you *thinking*?"

"I was thinking that . . . the bathroom

would make an excellent getaway!" Christopher squealed. He pounded across the foyer and threw himself into the downstairs bathroom, slamming the door and locking it.

"Ha-ha, big sister," he taunted from behind the door. "Catch me now, if you can!"

"If you say so," Irma whispered, with a scheming smile. She planted both palms on the bathroom door. Then she shut her eyes and felt her magic begin to bubble up within her. A swirl of blue energy pulsed from her palms. Irma could imagine the whirling, watery magic making its way through the bathroom door, then wafting over to, say, the shower.

No sooner had Irma conjured up the image than Christopher started shrieking.

"Aaaagh!" he cried. "Mummy! Daddy!"

Irma's parents thundered over to the bathroom door. Irma sidestepped them neatly and made her way to the stairs.

"What's happening in there?" Dad roared, as Mum jiggled the doorknob in alarm.

"Water is pouring out of the shower!" Christopher's voice squeaked. "And I'm getting all wet!"

Irma smiled with satisfaction and blew a

wispy remnant of magic from her index finger. Magical powers made taking care of pesky little brothers a whole lot easier. Now if only she could solve the issue of Metamoor's baddies as easily.

"*I'm* getting out of here," she muttered to herself. "The portal to Metamoor is waiting! We've got some kidnappers to deal with!"

THREE

Will stood in her bedroom, checking off items on a mental list.

Sneakers with good soles for running from Metamoorian bad guys? she thought, with a glance at her feet. Check.

A warm raincoat for weathering rain, snow, or even a tornado? (After all, who knew what season it was in Metamoor, much less what the weather awaiting them would be?) Check.

Granola bars and a brimming water bottle? Check.

"I guess I'm all set, then," Will said, looking around her room. Her eyes fell on her unmade bed, and she cringed guiltily. The least she could do before she left her mum – perhaps forever – was to tidy up her bedroom.

Will glanced at her watch. She had to meet her friends at the shell cave soon. There just wasn't time.

And besides, Will thought, indignantly, why should I do my mum any favours when I'm totally mad at her?

And why was Will mad? Because she'd recently spotted her mother holding hands with a man. In public! Since Will's parents were divorced, this sort of behavior was *technically* okay. But the fact that the man had been Will's history teacher was definitely *not* okay. In fact, it was downright humiliating! If Mum wants to go off and start dating Mr. Collins without even telling me, Will thought, well, I can very well leave my bed unmade while I go off to an alternate universe.

"So, there," she added out loud, giving her disheveled bedclothes a defiant glare.

"Rrrrr," the bed responded. Then the comforter began bouncing up and down.

"Aaaagh!" Will squealed. "First, the fridge and all my other electrical appliances start talking to me. Now my furniture is talking, too?!"

"Rrrrr," the bed said again. A whiskery,

brown face poked out from beneath the comforter and wiggled its nose at Will.

"Silly dormouse!" Will cried, pouncing on the bed and scooping up her pet dormouse. "I almost forgot about you."

She scratched the brown, squirrel-like critter's little, round ears and gave it a kiss goodbye. But before she let it scurry away again, she stopped to think.

"Wait a minute," she whispered. "What if I really don't come back from Meridian? Or I do come back, but it takes me a really long time? What'll happen to you, little guy?"

Will thought back to the day she'd rescued her dormouse from Uriah, Sheffield's leading bully. Uriah had been trying to capture the dormouse and put it into goofy Martin Tubbs's locker.

Will had chased Uriah and his lugheaded gang out of Heatherfield Park. And that's when Matt Olsen had ambled along.

At first, Will had expected Matt to be like every other guy she'd met in this town.

But he'd been about as different from the rest as anybody could get. Matt had bundled up the dormouse in his sweater, told Will all

about the care and feeding of the fluffy-tailed critters, and even given her his number, in case she had any questions for him.

Of course, Will thought dreamily, he was probably thinking I'd have *dormouse* questions, when what I really wanted to ask him was, how did you get so cute? What are you doing Friday night? How could a hip lead singer in a band possibly be so sweet?! And, of course, the big question – when can I see you again?

Will hadn't, of course, asked Matt any of those questions that day. In fact, she'd barely had the nerve to squeak, "Goodbye."

Will's shoulders slumped as she pondered her unrequited crush. And the long journey to Meridian ahead of her. *And* the plight of her little, soon-to-be-orphaned (well, maybe!) dormouse.

Then she figured out just what to do!

She picked up the dormouse and stuffed it into its favourite hiding place – her backpack. Then she grabbed her bicycle and darted out of the apartment.

As she pedaled through the waning light of the day, a little voice in the back of Will's head chastised her.

Oh, you're so concerned for your dormouse, eh? it said. *You're not just using this little animal as an excuse to see cute, brown-eyed Matt Olsen, are you?*

"No!" Will muttered to herself. "Please – I'm just asking Matt for a favour. Any responsible pet owner would. And, well, if he wants to give me a smooch, too . . ."

The thought of locking lips with Matt made Will flush bright red. As she coasted down the hill towards her crush's house, she shook her head. Stop dreaming, she told herself. Even if I am going off to another world, perhaps never to see Matt again, there's no way I would have the courage to kiss him. I could never do that – he's way too cute!

With the image of that dream kiss lingering in her head, Will didn't think she could ever face Matt at all!

He's probably not home, anyway, she thought, as she skidded to a stop in front of his house. I'll just leave the dormouse in his front yard and tie a little note around its neck.

Dismounting from her bike, Will looked up at Matt's house. It was a cute Victorian house with a big cupola that angled off the roof.

I wonder if that's Matt's room, Will thought dreamily. The front yard was a bit scruffy and overgrown. Darting around inside the slightly dilapidated fence were a few cats, a puppy, and even a squawking parrot!

Well, this *must* be the right place, she thought. Only the grandson of a veterinarian would have this many critters running around. I hope Matt doesn't mind having one more on his hands for a while.

Will slipped her backpack off her shoulders and pulled out the dormouse. The little animal looked up at the parrot – which had fluttered up to perch on one of the fence posts – and unleashed a series of nervous little peeps.

"Relax," Will whispered, stroking the little guy's head tenderly. With her other hand, she rifled around in her backpack for a scrap of paper and a pen. But the dormouse was squirming in her arms so much now that she couldn't hang on to it.

Oh, forget it, Will thought, letting the animal hop out of her arms and scamper into Matt's yard. She followed it through the front gate and hesitated. There was no way a note

was going to stay attached to her hyperactive little dormouse as it explored its temporary home.

I know, Will thought, reaching into her backpack again. I'll send Matt an e-mail from my cell phone.

As the dormouse scampered through the long grass, Will dashed off a quick note to Matt's e-mail address:

Dear Matt, she wrote, smiling to herself as she typed in the cutie's name. *Something's come up and I'm not going to be able to take care of my dormouse for a few days. Would you mind keeping an eye on him? You're the only one I could trust. Thanks a bunch! Will.*

With another wistful smile, Will hit SEND.

Then she giggled and typed in a P.S. *Oh, and could you take care of me, too?* she wrote. She laughed again and deleted the wishful P.S.

"I won't send that one," she whispered to herself. Then she jumped. What was that?

Creaaaaak!

Matt's front door was opening. As the crack in the doorway widened, Will saw both the toe of a big, floppy sneaker and a blue sweatshirt edging their way outside. It had to be Matt!

Glancing desperately around the yard, Will saw a shrub – actually more like a tangle of vines and leaves – near the fence. She scrambled behind the short bush and fell to the ground, hugging her knees and squeezing her eyes shut.

Why didn't I think he'd be home? She thought, berating herself. I hope he didn't see me!

Fearfully, she opened one eye and peeked through the leaves at Matt. He was gazing around the yard with a good-natured smile. Then the dormouse scampered up to his toe.

"Ah, there you are, dormouse," he said. Then he looked around the yard. "But where's your friend?"

Oh, man! Will thought, biting her lip. I'll definitely send a note next time. E-mails arrive way too fast!

When Matt didn't see her, he shrugged and grabbed the brown fuzzy animal up into his arms. He tickled the little guy under its chin and ran his hand over its fur. Will felt a little jealous.

Oh, if only I were a dormouse, she mused.

She raised herself out of the bush to get a

better view. Then she heaved a big sigh.

Too big a sigh.

Matt twisted around to look her way. Will stifled a yelp and ducked back into the shrubs, reaching for a couple of vines to stop herself from falling.

"Did you hear something?" Matt asked the little dormouse. He peered at the shrub and scratched the animal's ears absentmindedly. Will cringed and waited to see if she'd been caught. Apparently, she hadn't.

Matt merely shrugged and turned to head back into his house. The dormouse scampered up the boy's shoulder as he walked toward the door.

Will sighed with relief – until, that is, Matt made one last casual comment to the dormouse before stepping inside.

"I've really got to do some weeding in that shrubbery," he said. "Who knows what kind of bugs are lurking in that nettle bush?"

With that, the door slammed shut, whereupon Will looked around her in alarm.

Bugs?! she thought. Did he say bugs? I *hate* bugs.

Pulling on the vines more tightly, she got to

her feet and darted out from behind the shrub. She hopped around and brushed off her clothes. When she'd judged herself to be bug-free, she sighed with relief.

But, as Will hurried back to her bike, she became aware of something else. Though there were no insects crawling around beneath her clothes, she was still feeling decidedly itchy.

That was when she remembered Matt's *entire* sentence: *Who knows what kind of bugs are lurking in that* nettle *bush!*

Nettles! Will thought in dismay. She looked at her palms. And her wrists. And her ankles. Sure enough, hot, pink, and very itchy welts were beginning to rise up on every bit of skin that had touched the shrubbery.

Just great, Will thought, jumping onto her bike. She looked at her watch, then gave herself one good scratch before she started pedaling madly for the shell cave.

I'm going to be late to meet the other Guardians, *and* I'm an itch-monster, Will thought with a sigh. If I didn't know better, I'd say having a crush was as dangerous as battling creatures from Metamoor!

FOUR

Cornelia stood at the edge of the water. She crossed her long arms over her chest and gazed out over the water. The stretch of buildings that made up Heatherfield was just beginning to glitter with evening lights. Cornelia thought she could even make out the steel-and-glass sky-scraper where she lived.

Beyond that tableau, the sky was turning flame-orange as the sun set. It looked shim-mery and almost painfully pretty. As it dipped ever lower in the horizon, Cornelia shook her head over the contradiction of it all. There was the sun – a serene, beautiful, perfect sphere, getting ready to dunk itself into the roiling, cold ocean.

I know just how the sun must feel,

Cornelia thought with a sigh. I was living this life that anybody would call charmed. I have a fabulous wardrobe. Skating medals. A nice-enough family, if you don't count my annoying little sister, Lilian. And most of all, an amazing group of friends. Friends I could always count on to be there for me.

Now, my nice, orderly life is about to be plunged into chaos.

That stinks, she continued to muse petulantly. Especially since the girl who got us into our latest round of chaos can't even be bothered to show up on time! I mean, first *she* makes an executive decision to leave Taranee in Metamoor. Then she disses us. Some leader!

"Where is Will? It's cold here," Cornelia said brusquely, turning to look at Irma and Hay Lin. They had arrived just after she had. Now they were standing behind her, huddling for warmth in their coats and rubbing their hands in the wind.

"She called me to say she's running a little late," Irma said with a shrug. "I think she wanted to take a shower."

As Irma spoke, a particularly large breaker crashed onto the sand. Cornelia had to skitter

backward to avoid getting her sneakers soaked.

"We'll be taking a shower ourselves if we stay here much longer," she declared. "These waves are out of control!"

Irma flashed Cornelia one of her trademark, cocky grins – the kind that usually made Cornelia's blood boil. But this time, Irma had a welcome retort.

"Don't be afraid of the water, Cornelia," she said. "At least, not when I'm standing next to you!"

Irma planted her red shoes in the sand and turned to face another frothy wave that was headed straight for them. She threw her arms into the air. A shower of blue magic arced out into the ocean, dappling the giant wave just as it began to peak. The moment Irma's mystical blue stream hit the water, the wave seemed to stop in its tracks. In fact, it reared back like a shying horse! It flipped over, flinging itself back into the sea without ever connecting to the shore.

Irma turned to Cornelia and Hay Lin with a pleased smile and dusted sparks of excess magic off her hands. Cornelia felt a little

spasm of jealousy. She knew how Irma was feeling just then. After all, Cornelia had used her own swirls of green magic to make vines grow instantly out of the earth. She'd bored through walls of thick brick and even metal. She'd sped up time and tidied her bedroom without lifting a finger. She'd known true power – and she'd been thrilled by it. But, unlike Irma, Cornelia felt compelled to rein her magic in when she was in public.

Our magic is a gift and a curse, she thought broodingly. I'd never use it as frivolously as Irma does. Besides, what if someone saw us? They'd think we were circus freaks! We'd become instant Outfielders.

Outfielders, of course, was the name given to the unpopular kids at Sheffield Institute. Cornelia had always been an Infielder at school and she *really* wanted to keep it that way. That meant keeping her magic a thoroughly private matter.

If that's even possible, Cornelia thought grimly. Frankly, I feel like I'm losing control of this whole situation. I mean, *Will's* calling the shots. And, if I want to be a team player, I just have to go along with what she says.

Cornelia was even more disturbed by the mystery that surrounded Meridian. The place was only a dark and shadowy puzzle in her mind. She had no idea of what to expect when the girls crossed through the portal in a few minutes. She didn't even know if they'd survive this!

Of course, Irma and Hay Lin aren't thinking so bleakly, Cornelia thought, glancing at her grinning friends. They're still giddy over Irma's little parlour trick.

"I can't believe what you just did!" Hay Lin was sputtering to Irma. "Can you control all these waves?"

"Well," Irma said with false modesty. "It's not like I can make them go away. But I *can* ask them to take their foamy selves elsewhere!"

"Tell them to stay far away from our cave!" called a voice behind the three Guardians. They spun around in time to see Will pedaling her bike to the edge of the beach and grinding to a halt. She looked windblown and harassed. "I think it's time for us to head for that portal."

"Will," Irma breathed. "Finally!"

Giving them an apologetic look, Will got off her bike. Then the girls walked over to a huge, looming cave whose mouth was the shape of a perfect scallop shell. As they went inside, Irma said, "Since you've just arrived in town, Will, let me introduce you to the shell cave!"

"Kinda strange!" Will said, gazing up at the almost perfectly round, craggy ceiling. As she peered into the cave's gloom, she scratched her neck. Then she scratched one of her wrists. Then she moved back to her neck, *scritch-scritch-scritch*ing away.

"What's up?" Hay Lin asked, giving Will a fishy look. "Why are you scratching yourself?"

"Because nettle bushes have hateful, irritating leaves!" Will said with a grimace – and another scratch.

"That's not really an answer, is it?" Hay Lin replied with a cocked eyebrow and a sly grin.

"Well, it's the truth," Will said, becoming a bit pink in the cheeks. She didn't want to give her friends any specific details about her sudden itchiness.

"Okay, whatever," Cornelia said, butting in. "We've got some work to do. I think we

should create some astral drops to substitute for us."

Hay Lin's face fell.

"Is that really necessary?" she squeaked.

"I don't know when we'll be coming back," Cornelia said with a curt nod. "To tell you the truth, I don't know *if* we'll come– "

"Of course, we'll come back, Cornelia," Will interrupted. "With Taranee!"

Cornelia turned to gaze at Will. "If you're so certain of that," she said, "then why don't you put your money where your mouth is? Make an astral drop with the rest of us, so we can be on our way to Metamoor."

She knew her voice was dripping with challenge. But that was just the way it had to be. If Will was going to fight her at every turn, she'd fight back!

"Be quiet, and I *will* whip up a double!" Will declared, sticking her chin out. "But I'm doing it for Taranee. Only for her!"

Will clamped her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists. Following her lead, Irma and Hay Lin became still, too. In fact, as they fell into states of deep concentration, they began to . . . glow! Streams of cool, blue light began to

swirl around their bodies. The glow grew so bright and strong it began to stream out of the shell cave's entrance.

Cornelia closed her eyes as well. She imagined her astral drop – her double, her clone – separating from her. She envisioned that phantom Cornelia sleeping in her bed, kissing her sister good-night, flirting with boys in the halls at school. She felt a stab of pain at the idea of this specter – an intruder – living her life.

But then, Cornelia thought of Taranee – her friend, trapped in Metamoor. That made for a much sharper pang of grief.

It's worth it, Cornelia thought to herself, to help Taranee. After all, what is friendship, if not giving up a bit of yourself?

As the thought skimmed through Cornelia's mind, she felt suddenly lighter. She felt empty. She felt – a presence, hovering right in front of her face.

So Cornelia opened her eyes. She gave a yelp of surprise. A second Cornelia – three-dimensional and blinking in surprise – stood before her!

FIVE

Through her lowered eyelids, Will was dimly aware of a bright blue glow. It was swirling and shimmering around her and her fellow Guardians.

Abruptly, the light disappeared. Will felt the darkness return, like a light, cool cloak. In fact, she felt light from within, too! She had become somehow airy and ethereal and . . .

Suddenly, Will's mouth went dry.

I bet I know why I feel so light, she thought with a tremble. I think there's a bit of me that's missing – namely, my astral drop!

Sure enough, when Will's eyes popped open, she saw a version of herself standing right in front of her! The sight of her double was extremely disconcerting.

Are my knees really that knobby? she thought. And, whoa, is that what the back of my head looks like?

Will tried to shake off her freak-out.

Get a grip, she told herself. It's not as if this is the first time you've doubled yourself. We all created astral drops in Metamoor once before, to provide decoys for those Metamoorian henchmen.

But that had been a crisis situation. The moment the Guardians had spun out their astral drops, they'd sent the Metamoorians running after the doubles. Sure enough, Frost the Hunter had caught their astral drops – giving the *real* Guardians a chance to make a run for it. And they'd all gotten away – except Taranee.

The point was, Will hadn't had but a moment to contemplate her astral drop. Now, she was staring right at . . . her? It? What was she, or it, anyway, this other Will?

I know one thing that she, or it, is, Will thought as she watched her double begin exploring the shell cave. She's a little loopy!

Astral Will was spinning around in giddy circles, staring up at the ceiling with an empty

little smile and twirling tendrils of her red hair around her fingertips absentmindedly.

Weird, Will thought. Then she shrugged. Well, I guess that's astral-drop behaviour, right? she mused.

She glanced at the other girls' doubles. She watched them walk like Cornelia, Irma, and Hay Lin. Talk like Cornelia, Irma, and Hay Lin. Even their eyes had the same ways of glimmering as Cornelia's, Irma's, and Hay Lin's. Will's shoulders climbed up to her ears nervously. She bit her lip as she watched her friends meet their astral selves.

"Amazing," Irma cried, as she stared at Astral Irma. "You are . . . me?"

As if she couldn't quite believe it were true, Irma reached out and tweaked Astral Irma's nose.

Astral Irma glared at the real Irma irritably and pulled away. "Hey!" she sniped. "Pinch your own nose!"

At that, Irma grinned. She turned to her friends (and their doubles) and declared, "I don't know about you, but I think I look *pret*-ty good!"

"All I know," Hay Lin said, staring at her

own astral drop in bewilderment, "is that I'm definitely seeing double."

"It's fantastic," Cornelia declared. Her astral drop was looking at her with a typically knowing smirk. "It's like looking at our reflections in a mirror!"

"Ooh, I hope not," Astral Cornelia retorted drily. She pointed at the actual Cornelia. "I'd like to think I'm prettier than *that*!"

Cornelia blinked at her double in utter amazement.

"What did you just say?!" she shrieked at, um, herself.

Irma rolled her eyes and smirked at Will.

"Oh, yes," she said with a glib nod. "They really are just like us."

"Uh," Will quavered. She was watching Astral Will slump onto a boulder at the shell cave's mouth. Her double looked positively lost. "Maybe not all of them!"

Suddenly, the other girls – even Cornelia and Astral Cornelia – fell silent. They all formed a circle around Astral Will. She responded with a blank, vacant stare.

"Er . . . *Will*," Irma said to Astral Will, with exaggerated slowness. "Where do you live?"

"I live in . . . um," Astral Will stuttered, "I live on a street in, um, a . . . place. . . ."

Will felt her heart sink as Irma threw up her hands.

"She's a blank!" Irma cried. "Empty! Zero!"

"I wonder how that happened," Hay Lin said to Will. "Our astral drops know everything we know – every sensation, every memory. And yours is just the opposite."

Will's mouth dropped open in dismay. Quickly, however, her shock turned to guilt. All at once, Will knew *exactly* how this had happened. It was all her fault!

She hung her head and stumbled away from her friends. In a small, trembly voice, she admitted, "While I was creating her, in the back of my mind, I was afraid that she would–"

"Take your place indefinitely?" Cornelia cut in. For the first time since the girls had arrived at the cave, Cornelia's harsh voice softened. Will looked up and caught her friend's gaze. Behind the hardness in Cornelia's eyes Will saw a glimmer of understanding.

Will and Cornelia had definitely had their

differences since the memorable debacle in Metamoor, but at this moment, Will felt as though Cornelia were her best friend. Cornelia seemed to understand Will's fear that her astral drop might be just as special as – or perhaps even *more* special than – Will herself.

Will felt a surge of warmth and gratitude.

Of course, a moment later, a glance at Astral Will brought in a quick cold front. Sympathy from Cornelia wasn't going to make Will's problem go away.

And Irma's idea didn't seem feasible, either.

"Hey, if it's no good," she declared, "just make another one!"

"No," Cornelia said, shaking her head. "There's no guarantee that this won't happen all over again."

Will shook her head and sighed.

"Cornelia's right," she said to the group. "This is my problem, so I'll fix it. It should be easy enough!"

Will took her backpack off her shoulders and fished out a paper and pencil. She began making a list. A list of everything – *absolutely everything* – she did during the day, from

brushing her teeth in the morning to stopping by her locker after lunch to watching *Boy Comet* on TV every Tuesday night.

After some careful and detailed jotting, Will thought she'd covered it all. She thrust the list into her double's hands. Astral Will read the list (at least she could read!), then gave Will a simple smile.

"Do you get this?" Will asked her severely. "On this paper, I've written everything you should and should *not* do. You can understand that, can't you, Will?"

Astral Will shrugged in a way that looked – Will had to admit it – pretty Will-like. Then she nodded and smiled sweetly.

Will felt her shoulders untense a bit.

Maybe this will work, she thought hopefully. All the astral me has to do is follow these simple instructions and we'll pull this off without a hitch. She'll be totally me and everything will be fine.

Astral Will flashed her maker another wide smile, then folded her list and put it into her jeans pocket.

"Sure, sure, I've got it," she declared.

"Thank goodness," Will sighed.

"I've only got one question," Astral Will interjected.

"Uh-huh?" Will responded skeptically.

"Hmmm," Astral Will wondered with wide eyes. "Who's this Will?"

"What?" Will cried. She sat her double down on the ground and crouched before her.

"We need to have a long talk," Will said to her double, sighing.

Twenty minutes later, Will emerged from the shell cave, just as Hay Lin was waving good-bye to Astral Hay Lin. The double gave Hay Lin a wink, then scampered over the boulders toward Heatherfield with a quick, light, and very familiar gait.

Will heaved an envious sigh. Adding insult to injury was the fact that Cornelia immediately began chatting with Hay Lin about their very successful astral drops.

"So, yours has hit the road, too, huh?" Cornelia said. "I said good-bye to my drop a few minutes ago. I think she'll do fine."

"Yeah!" Hay Lin marveled. "I've questioned her about all my habits, and it looks like she knows everything! She'll go home, lie

down in my bed, and probably even have my dreams."

"While *we*, on the other hand," Cornelia scowled, "head straight into a nightmare!"

Will sighed. Cornelia was right. As their journey to Metamoor grew ever closer, her hands were feeling more trembly and her stomach was quaking.

It doesn't help, Will thought irritably, that my astral drop is–

"Ready," said a very familiar voice behind Will. "I think I'm ready!"

Will turned around to glower at Astral Will as she emerged from the shell cave. She was scanning Will's list attentively.

"Okay," Astral Will said. "At seven A.M. – wake up. Seven-fifteen – shower. At ten to eight, kiss Mum good morning. Then breakfast, then– "

"Okay, okay, I think you've got it," Will said sternly. "Listen, if you just follow the instructions, you can't go wrong. And remember– "

"I know, I know," Astral Will interrupted impatiently. She was slinging her leg over Will's red bike. "I'll study what I'm *not* sup-

posed to do. You've written those things in bold and underlined each one three times!"

Before Will could say anything else, Astral Will gave her a cavalier wave and began to pedal away. Will watched her double go, then hung her head in worry.

"Oh, man," she sighed. "I hope she finds her way home, at least."

She felt Irma's sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

"She'll be fine," Irma assured her. "It's us I'm worried about. We'd better hurry. Its time to head to Metamoor!"

SIX

With her fellow Guardians, Hay Lin watched Astral Will pedal up the hill and away. Then she turned to walk with them back into the looming shell cave. She gazed up at the scallop-shaped mouth of the cave and was transported – just for an instant – back in time. She and Irma were suddenly little kids again, playing hide-and-seek.

Then she, Irma, and Elyon were in the shell cave, giggling and toasting marshmallows over a campfire.

Next, it was summertime. Hay Lin had been bodysurfing all afternoon, and she'd sought shelter again in the cave, laying her sunburned self down on its cool, dark, sandy floor.

The place had always been a haven.

Now it was a gateway to the unknown.

Hay Lin sighed. "I've come to this cave thousands of times," she told the others. "I would never have expected it to be the site of a portal!"

As the girls plunged deeper into the cavern, darkness surrounded them.

"Hay Lin and I brought equipment," Irma said, pulling a flashlight out of her bag and clicking it on.

Oh, yeah, Hay Lin thought, shaking her head slightly. Stop daydreaming. It's mission time. She pulled her own flashlight out and shone it into the cave. The bright beam of light skimmed over a chaos of painted scrawls and etchings – words, initials, hearts, pictures – all mementos of people's time in the cave.

"There's so much graffiti on the walls!" Will gasped. "I didn't notice it before."

"Yup," Irma mused. She paused before a couple of inked phrases. The first said I LOVE ANNE. S.R. The next read ANNE + BILLY. SORRY, S.R.

"It's cutthroat," Irma said with a giggle. "He goes out with her one summer. And the same summer, she's dating someone else. Cruel! Every carving is a love story. They're little bits of history!"

Cornelia scowled.

"No they're not, Irma," she scoffed. "They're acts of vandalism!"

Cornelia skimmed her tapered fingers over the cave wall and squinted at the graffiti angrily.

"Now that I have the power of the earth," she said, "I realise more and more that people don't respect it!"

She's got a point, Hay Lin thought, with a nod. But she didn't have time to voice her opinion. Suddenly, on a section of almost-bare wall up ahead, she saw something.

Something that made her blood run cold.

Hay Lin made herself run to the wall.

"Look here!" she cried to her friends. They hurried after her. Breathing hard, Hay Lin slapped a hand onto the wall, right next to a picture. Unlike the other scrawls, this image was composed of blue paint. It was a cluster of four swirly flames.

"Blue fire, four flames," Will said dully. "So? What's the big deal?"

"It's the same one that Irma doodled in class this morning," Hay Lin cried. "In her diary!"

Irma gazed at the blue flames. Her eyes widened in disbelief. This was unbelievable.

"That's impossible," she croaked. "I haven't been here for a year – at least!"

She put a hand on her furrowed forehead.

"I was lost in thought when I drew that," Irma added.

Suddenly, Will let out a muffled moan, and her knees buckled. She felt woozy. She fell backwards and would have hit the hard, cave floor if Cornelia hadn't caught her.

"Will!" Irma screamed, jolting herself out of her reverie.

Hay Lin knelt down next to Will and held her breath. Will's head lolled for a moment. But only a few seconds later, her big, brown eyes fluttered open, and she managed to give her friends a weak smile.

"Everything's okay, you guys," she rasped. "It's just the usual dizzy spell."

"The dizzy spell you have whenever you're near a portal," Hay Lin pointed out.

Ever since the girls had discovered their extraordinary powers, Will had been having those spells. Her head would fall forward onto her chest, and her face would become paper-

white. She'd groan, and a cold sweat would break out on her forehead. The closeness of Metamoor made her ill. The one good thing about the attacks was that they also let the Guardians know when they'd hit their mark.

"Maybe this means the portal is here," Hay Lin said, staring in awe at the blue flames scrawled on the stone wall.

Will lurched to her feet and stood next to the bit of graffiti. She beckoned to her fellow Guardians. The girls joined hands and formed a semicircle around the image of the flames. Will shook away the last of her dizziness and gave each girl a serious look. When Will's eyes met Hay Lin's, Hay Lin tried to smile. She tried to draw on the strength and determination she saw in Will's eyes. This was no time to back down. She had to be brave – for Taranee.

"Let's try to open the portal," Will said somberly. "Stay strong. I'm going to touch the drawing. . . ."

Looking around, Hay Lin observed each girl's reaction. Cornelia's face remained unreadable. Irma's eyes were open and curious. And Will looked terrified. Hay Lin could only imagine what *she* looked like. She

watched, with wide, fearful eyes, as Will's fingertips stretched towards the blue flames, reaching out for the next chapter in the Guardians' overwhelming destiny.

Here we go again, Hay Lin thought. It was another moment of truth. Once more, we are going to step through a doorway that seems to go nowhere. We are going to risk our lives because we are the Guardians. And what's on the other side? Who knows? But something will be there – waiting.

SEVEN

As Will clasped Cornelia's hand and got ready to touch the four blue flames painted on the cave wall, she felt a wave of uncertainty surge through her chest. She didn't want to admit it, but she was scared.

She glanced around the circle at her friends. On their pale faces, she could see the same fear that she was feeling.

But she also saw Cornelia's set jaw.

And Irma's stubbornly pouty lips.

And Hay Lin's fiery eyes.

They were *all* scared. But they were also superdetermined!

We're together! Will reminded herself as her fingers intertwined with Cornelia's.

That gave her the strength finally to touch

her hand to the scroll-like picture on the cave wall. She pressed her palm against the rock and closed her eyes. Then she waited for the Heart of Candracar that was within her to work its magic. She expected to feel a bubble of energy well up inside her. Maybe a swirl of pink magic would envelop the quartet. Or perhaps the portal would burst open, flickering with blue flames. Maybe the tunnel would even ripple, just like the one that had opened in Mrs. Rudolph's attic.

Whatever happened, Will knew it would be dramatic.

She braced herself and waited.

And waited.

O-*kay* . . . she thought impatiently. Ready for some action!

But nothing happened. No pink swirls. No big, bad shafts of light. Nada.

Finally, Will opened one eye a crack and glanced around. Her hand was still placed over the blue drawing. She and her three friends were still standing, shivering slightly, in a cold, seaside cave. Each one of them had cautiously opened one of her eyes.

Finally, Will sighed in frustration and

dropped Cornelia's hand.

"Nothing happened!" she cried.

"Oh, sure it did," Cornelia cracked. "Magic kept us here among all this amazing artwork."

When Cornelia tossed out the careless barb, Will felt her shoulders sag.

First, I create a clueless astral drop, she thought. Then, I can't even open a portal.

Excuse me, Will thought, glancing at the ceiling – and towards the place where she imagined the Oracle of Candracar lived. Please remind me again *why* I'm the leader of this crew? Especially when I can't seem to do anything right?

Will must have been wearing her sadness on her sleeve, because suddenly Irma spoke up cheerfully.

"Don't worry, Will," she said. "I get faint sometimes, too. Usually, when it's been a long time since dinner."

Cornelia huffed and turned her back on Will.

"'Don't worry, *Will*!' *Pooooor* Will," she whined. "Shouldn't we be thinking about poor somebody *else* right now?"

Will felt as if someone had kicked her in the

stomach. Feeling short of breath, she whispered, "All you do is blame me for Taranee's situation, Cornelia. . . ."

As she rasped out the words, Will felt her hurt and her anger growing. Her voice grew shrill, and, before she knew it, she'd stomped over to Cornelia and leaned into her pretty, sullen face.

"You know very well that *she* was the one who asked me to leave her in Metamoor," Will cried. "She did it to save us."

Will's outburst seemed to crack Cornelia's icy veneer. She actually seemed startled and – perhaps – even a little remorseful? Her voice was less edgy as she replied, "I'm not saying that Taranee didn't speak to you. I'm only saying that I wish I'd heard her, too."

"No! You don't!" Will almost screamed. She felt her lip tremble and her eyes well up with tears. "You're lucky! You don't hear Taranee's desperate cry echoing around your head every hour. Every minute! Every . . . every *second*!"

Will flung her backpack to the ground and fell to her knees, burying her face in her hands. Her body was shaking with sobs now. Her guilt – and Taranee's grief – had been weighing upon

her from the moment the girls had returned to Heatherfield. Now she had finally reached her breaking point.

Will sniffed loudly, and her chest heaved with sobs. She didn't know if she'd ever be able to stop crying! She really *was* a terrible leader!

But suddenly, something broke through Will's grief. It was the light, cool touch of a hand on her shoulder. It was Cornelia's! In a tender and comforting voice, Cornelia whispered, "Will, I'm sor– "

"Shhhhh!"

That was Irma. And her voice sounded urgent.

"Listen!" she hissed.

A feeling of fear made Will catch her breath. With one last hiccup, her sobs subsided. She blinked away the tears in her eyes and peered into the cave. Irma's head was cocked intently.

"What?" Hay Lin whispered. "I don't hear anything."

"That's my point," Irma squeaked. "Where's the noise of the waves? The roar of the ocean?"

Suddenly, Irma spun around.

"And that's not all," she exclaimed, pointing at the ceiling. "Look, there's a weird, glowy light in here all of a sudden."

Irma turned off her flashlight to prove her point. Will gasped. Irma was right. The cave, which should have been pitch-black without the flashlight beam, was filled with a wavery, blue light.

"And the cave walls have become all smooth and glassy," Irma added. "Like the inside of a real shell!"

No sooner had Irma said the word "shell" than Will heard an echoey, distant roar. It sounded just like the inside of a shell when she cupped it around her ear to hear the ocean!

"What is that?" Will asked anxiously, glancing over her shoulder.

Then she screamed.

The ocean sound in a seashell was usually just an illusion. But what she saw was real – a giant gush of roiling water, crashing through the cave and heading straight for the Guardians. It was going to engulf them!

"Water!" Hay Lin screamed. "Lots and lots of water!"

Cornelia threw herself against Irma as the water began to swirl around the girls' feet.

"Irma!" she cried. "Do something!"

Acting seemingly on instinct, Irma thrust out her arms beside her. In a steely voice, she announced, "I'll create a bubble of air!"

Will felt the water rise around them. She sucked in a desperate gulp of air and held her breath. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed onto Cornelia and Hay Lin for some much-needed support.

She gasped as the cold water swirled around her legs. It quickly rose to her waist. Then her chest. Then her head!

"Aaaaaagh!" Will screamed.

She gasped and screamed again.

Before she could scream a third time, she realised something.

I just breathed! she thought incredulously. I gasped and didn't suck in a lungful of water.

Will's eyes flew open. Irma had done exactly what she'd said she would! She'd created a giant, bobbly air bubble around the four of them. Now, they were bouncing along peacefully in water that surrounded them on all sides.

Will heaved a sigh of relief and flashed Irma a triumphant thumbs-up. But she didn't have time to savour their survival. They had to figure out what to do next! And where they were headed.

Will spun around and pressed her hands to the balloonlike wall of the air bubble. She peered around, but all she could see was the walls of the cave. They were still smooth and glassy. The walls had also lengthened into a long tunnel – a tunnel that was transporting their air bubble at a rapid pace.

"That was no tidal wave," Will declared. "This is a portal. We're crossing over into Metamoor!"

Hay Lin pulled her backpack off her shoulders and began yanking heavy, shapeless cloaks out of it. They were made of nubby, brown fabric.

"Quick! Put these on," she ordered the girls, tossing each one a garment.

"What kind of fashion faux pas are these?!" Cornelia asked, regarding her cloak with a curled lip.

"Hey, don't dis the designer," Irma said, squirming into her own cloak. Its floppy hood

completely covered her honey-coloured hair.

"Don't worry about it," Hay Lin said. "They *are* pretty ugly. Like monks' robes. They're the same things I remember seeing the people in Meridian wear."

"Brilliant!" Will cried, pulling her own cloak around her shoulders. "This way, we can be less suspicious."

"That's what I was hoping," Hay Lin said. "Of course, we don't even know if we're in the right place."

"We'll find out soon enough," Cornelia pointed out, pressing her hands to the wall of the air bubble. "There's a light up ahead. We're heading out of this tunnel!"

Will clutched at Cornelia's robe. Hay Lin and Irma threw their arms around each other. As the bubble plunged through the mouth of the tunnel, they looked around. And then together, they all began to quake!

"If this is what's outside," Hay Lin cried, "I want to go back inside! Now!"

"We're . . . we're . . . specks!" Irma cried. "We're floating around in nothingness!"

Will nodded in agreement. A nod was all she could muster. There was no way she could

talk. She was petrified. Where were they? She peeked over her shoulder at the giant cave from which the girls had emerged.

It *was* a seashell!

That's impossible, Will thought. There's no seashell on earth big enough to dwarf four girls like us.

Will turned back to her friends to see what they thought. Their faces told her that they were occupied with other worries – namely, the giant, glassy orb looming right in front of their air bubble!

In the center of the orb was an inky dot, as looming and menacing as a black hole.

Around the dot was a shimmery circle of green.

And around *that* was a sea of white, threaded with craggy, red seams.

A glassy, blue shade of some sort closed over the orb. Just as quickly, the shade lifted. Then it lowered and lifted again.

Almost like a blinking eyelid, Will thought.

A blinking . . . eyelid?!?

Suddenly, Hay Lin squealed and fell backwards, landing on the floor of the bubble with a plop. Cornelia hunched down over her knees in

fear. And Will grabbed Irma's elbow, clutching her friend's arm with a strength born of terror.

They were trapped in a bubble with no way to escape. Nothing they had encountered before could have prepared Will for what she was now looking at. This was unbelievable – and terrifying.

"Irma?" she squeaked. "That nothingness you mentioned? Well, it's looking right at us!"

EIGHT

"Aaaaaaaaagh!" Will, Cornelia, and Hay Lin shrieked, clinging to each other in horror.

But Irma couldn't muster up the breath to scream. She was too busy. One part of her mind was focused on – duh! – being terrified. But another part of her, the part that was a magical Guardian, had to concentrate on keeping herself and her friends alive. Without Irma's air bubble, they were sunk – literally!

So, even as Irma gaped at the giant eyeball – which was scrutinizing the girls between slow, lazy blinks – she had to keep blue magic pulsing from her palms, breathing life into their air bubble, and keeping the water at bay.

Speaking of water, Irma thought, what kind of odd ocean are we floating around i

anyway? Time to scope out the situation!

Luckily, the giant eyeball chose that very moment to rise up, up, up, and away from the Guardians. As Irma craned her neck to peer at the retreating orb, she gasped.

She was staring straight at a lumpish, blue, Metamoorian creature – another one of the ogres that had been terrorising the Guardians ever since they had first acquired their powers. And just like the other big, blue baddie in their lives, this dude was unspeakably ugly. His big, potatoey head was flanked by pointy, fuzzy ears and grey, rocklike lumps. His neck was nonexistent. His hands, which were clutching a tall glass of water, were awkward, pudgy, and tipped with dirty claws.

The only difference between this blue guy and the other blue guy? The first villain – Vathek, as Irma had heard him called the last time they had been in Metamoor – was only about twice the size of the girls. *This* ogre was at least *one hundred* times as big as they were.

He was peering down at the girls with a devilish grin. And that's when Irma noticed something else.

He was dry!

Whereas, we're all wet! Irma thought. We're inside some container of water in this giant's house. Now I know how Jack the Giant-Killer felt!

Suddenly, the blue creature opened his mouth to say something. Irma couldn't have been more shocked at his first utterance.

"Mummy!" he cried. The creature's voice was thick and phlegmy, but also high-pitched.

"He's just a kid!" Will hissed in Irma's ear.

"Come and see, Mummy!" the kid cried again. As he slammed his giant water glass down near the girls' container, Irma began to wrap her brain around this new reality. They were inside a glass bowl, on a wooden table, in a mammoth house. They were this giant, blue kid's new pets!

"I'm cooking dinner, Fargart," a deep, rumbly voice called from the distance somewhere. "I can't come and see."

The blue kid – Fargart – trotted away. So Irma and her friends had a chance to look around. The room looked like the interior of a medieval castle: looming Gothic furniture, tapestries, and Tudor-style windowpanes. The

walls were made of stone blocks, and the light was dim.

Yup, Irma thought with a nod. We're in Metamoor, all right. The last time the girls had landed in that gloomy world, the architecture had all looked like this – cold, forbidding, and ancient.

Irma's ears pricked up as "little" Fargart ran into another room and began chattering excitedly to his mother.

"That hermit crab I found at the market is coming out of its house," he announced.

"That was only an empty shell," Fargart's mum said from the next room. Then Irma heard a squishing sound. She cringed.

I wonder what Mum's cooking for dinner, she thought with a shudder. Sautéed space aliens? Or maybe . . . eggs with a side of humans!

"You need to stop picking things up off the ground," Fargart's mum admonished him.

"I didn't pick it up," the boy protested. "I found it!"

"Girls, I've got a terrible feeling about this," Will said, turning to her friends. "Clearly, we're in Metamoor. But we're also really, *really* small!"

"*And*," Irma piped up, "We seem to be floating around in some kind of glass bowl."

"Uh-huh," Will said. She gazed up at the circular rim of the bowl, which loomed seemingly hundreds of feet above them. "The thing that worries me is, I know of only one reason a kid would have a glass bowl filled with water."

"Are you saying," Hay Lin asked, clutching at Irma frantically, "that somewhere in here we might see a little . . . fish?"

"A *big* fish!" Cornelia squealed, pointing to a stack of rocks near the girls' bubble.

"Aaaaaaaagh!" the Guardians shrieked in unison.

They were looking at another giant eye.

But this eye was black and soulless. And it was attached to some sort of green, aquatic creature with fins, a tail, *and* eight legs! The fish's puckering mouth was lined with jagged, yellow teeth, and its inky eyes looked decidedly . . . hungry!

Irma clutched at her friends and squeezed her eyes shut in horror.

Okay, she thought as she felt every bone in her body begin to tremble. I think I *finally*

understand what my English teacher means when he talks about "irony." Irony has to do with the fact that one of my kindred spirits – a water-dwelling sea creature – is going to eat me up!

Irma covered her face with her hands, unleashed one anguished sob, and then waited for the giant fish's teeth to slash into the girls' air bubble. The fish would soon begin gobbling the girls up, one by one. She braced herself to feel horrible pain.

But instead, she felt power!

Irma was sensing the telltale presence of the girls' mystical strength. She peeked out through her fingers and saw swirls of silver, blue, green, and pink enveloping them all like a protective blanket. Then Irma felt a shaking. And a shuddering.

And a swooping. Now it was the Guardians who were going up, up, and away. They were hurtling toward the ceiling.

They were growing!

Irma felt a quick bite of pressure on her arms and legs. Then she heard the tinkling of breaking glass. The girls had burst out of their fishbowl. Finally, their feet hit a stone floor.

Irma glanced around the room. The table was now about waist-high. The chairs were short enough for the girls to sit in.

"We're back!" Irma cried, jumping up and down.

"Yeah, and we're about to get caught," Cornelia hissed, jerking her thumb towards the kitchen door. Two rumbly voices were drawing closer.

"I want *you* to see it, mummy," Fargart was urging his mother.

"Oh, all right," the girls heard her say.

"Quick," Hay Lin squeaked, pointing at the tall, Gothic windows. "Let's make a getaway to safety."

She closed her eyes and thrust her palms toward her friends. Silver swirls began to emanate from her hands. She was going to use her magic to fly the Guardians through the nearby windows.

As Irma watched Hay Lin work her magic, she silently corrected her friend. We'll see what kind of safety we can find in Metamoor, she thought with a shudder. Then she braced herself for the magical teleportation. But just before Hay Lin's power spirited the girls away, Irma's

eyes fell upon something flopping around near her shoe. It was the multilegged green fish. It was writhing and gasping pathetically.

Irma felt a pang of pity.

Okay, so a few seconds ago this critter was looking at me like a side of fries, she thought with a shrug. But still, he is a water-dweller. I can't help thinking he's cute.

Irma held up her hand.

"One second," she told Hay Lin.

"What?!" Cornelia sputtered. "You'll get us caught!"

Irma ignored Cornelia's comment and bent over to scoop up the poor, flopping fish. She plunked him into the glass of water that was still standing among the shards of broken fishbowl.

"All right!" Irma said, nodding at Hay Lin.

Whoooooooosh!

For a moment, Irma couldn't breathe. A swirl of air around her seemed to pull all the oxygen from her lungs.

An instant later, she and her friends were standing on the other side of the tall, now-open window. They stumbled for a moment and clutched at each other for balance. That's

when they heard the mother scolding her little boy again.

"Fargart!" she bellowed. "Your fishbowl is broken all over the floor! Is this any way to take care of your things?"

"What?" Fargart cried. "But where's my carnivorous spiderfish?"

Spiderfish? Irma thought. *Carnivorous?!*

"Here it is." Irma could hear the mother plodding heavily over to the table. She must have been looking into the water glass. "Poor fishie. Look at how it's trembling. It's terrified!"

"I . . . don't understand," Fargart squealed.

"Well, maybe your father will help you understand," his mother announced. "You and he can have a long talk when he gets home."

Irma couldn't help but giggle.

"I adore our powers," she said. "We keep discovering new things they can do. Like restoring us to our proper size."

"Just in time, I'd say," Cornelia said. She nudged her cloak's heavy, brown hood off her head so she could look around. The Guardians were standing on a crowded, cobblestoned street lined with grey, stone build-

ings. The air was hazy with soot and dirt. And it didn't smell so great, either.

Apprehensively, the girls tiptoed down the empty street. Irma found herself pulling her cloak more tightly around her and shivering.

"Taranee must be here somewhere," Will said, as the girls rounded a corner.

"And so are a bunch of monsters," Irma said in a quivering voice. "Remember what it was like here before? Lizardy creatures and big, lumpy, blue guys and scaly, dreadlocky Mrs. Rudolph types?"

She looked to her friends. Will and Cornelia gave her trembly nods. But Hay Lin only smiled peacefully. As she walked – make that glided – down the bumpy street, the smallest Guardian closed her eyes and cocked her head, yet she never stumbled or tripped.

"Hay Lin?" Cornelia blurted. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," Hay Lin replied without opening her eyes. "The air of Metamoor's streets is talking to me! I smell its perfumes. I hear the sound of its voices. I think these monsters are not so different from us after all!"

Irma looked at Hay Lin's face. Her bud

seemed so serene – happy, even! As the five girls walked into a courtyard milling with Metamoorians, Irma willed herself to follow her friend's example – to restrain herself from shuddering in disgust. And that was when she really saw what Hay Lin was talking about. Though this Metamoorian city's dwellers looked about as different from the Guardians as they possibly could, their activities were familiar. Green, scaly youths were chasing a ball around the cobblestoned street. A tall lizard in a brown cloak was buying some blue vegetables from a street cart. A couple of plump, flat-snouted creatures were giggling and clutching schoolbooks.

Those girls might be our age! Irma marveled. They are really just like us, dashing home for an after-school snack and gossiping about cute boys.

Suddenly, Irma was looking at the bustling city with a gleam in her eye. Hay Lin practically spoke her thoughts.

"The last time we were here," Hay Lin declared, "I felt like an outsider. But today, it frightens me less!"

Irma kept looking around. When her eye

fell upon a little store tucked between a grisly butcher's shop and a parchment-filled newsstand, she grinned.

"I've got an idea," she said. "As long as we're feeling brave, why not start unraveling Metamoor's mysteries? How about right there!"

She pointed at a store filled with all sorts of mysterious wares. In the window, Irma saw parchment scrolls and telescopelike instruments. She saw orbs that looked like crystal balls and mortars and pestles just made for a witch's workshop. She saw . . . adventure.

"Um, I don't know," Will responded shakily. "We've got to fly below the radar here."

"Come on, Will! Look at that dusty old shop," Irma said. "Do you think *anyone* goes in there? I just want to take a quick peek around. Five minutes. You won't be sorry!"

Then she trotted across the street towards the shop.

Irma stuck to her promise, and, a few minutes later, the girls were walking through Metamoor's streets once again. They'd pulled their faces deep within their cloaks' shadowy hoods. Irma no longer felt chilled and shivery. Their browse

through the bizarre shop had whipped her into an excited sweat.

Or maybe she was just feeling the heat of Will's glare. Her stare was harsh!

"I'm so mad at you, Irma!" Will suddenly cried.

"Why?" Irma demanded in surprise.

"You shouldn't have talked to that shopkeeper," Will said. "Do you want Phobos and his followers to find out about us?"

"Please," Irma said, waggling the bell-shaped cuff of the sleeve of her heavy cloak. "In clothes like these, even Mrs. Knickerbocker wouldn't recognise us."

And our eagle-eyed school principal sees everything! Irma thought.

"Anyway," she continued out loud. "It was worth it. I traded him my watch for . . . this!"

With a dramatic flourish, Irma pulled her prize out from under her cloak and showed it to her friends. The blue ball cradled in her palm pulsed with glowing energy.

"Wow, a sphere," Cornelia said drily. "Do you kick it or eat it?"

"Wait a minute," Hay Lin said excitedly. She grabbed Irma's wrist and leaned over to

take a closer look at the orb.

"Hey – that's a three-dimensional map of Metamoor!" she cried. "Wow! If you squint at it, you can even see people in miniature."

"Uh-huh," Irma bragged. "I've got the whole world in my hands, you could say. And look at this."

Irma turned the sphere around in her hands until she found a starfish-shaped building.

"See?" she said, pointing to the little star. "The shopkeeper told me that that's the castle of Phobos."

"Do you think Taranee is locked up inside there?" Hay Lin cried.

"I don't know," Will said, gently lifting the map from Irma's hand and peering at it with determination. "I guess it's possible. And if that *is* where she is, we've got a lot of ground to cover."

Will looked at Irma seriously. Irma saw fire in their leader's brown eyes.

"We *will* find Taranee," Will declared. "Even if we have to walk all over this entire planet!"

NINE

The Oracle floated – for the Oracle never needed to walk to transport himself – into the Circle of Knowing. This was his private observatory – a perfectly round, ornately decorated room deep within the Temple of Candracar.

Enormous as a country, but hidden away in the clouds of infinity, Candracar was, put quite simply, the place where good resided.

Its master was the Oracle, ancient but unbent and unlined. He saw all and knew all – all of the world's injustices and all its pain. Yet he still had faith that earth and its goodness would survive the war with Metamoor.

The Oracle had created the Veil that separated those worlds. He had also anointed the five young Guardians that now protected the

Veil. As he'd watched, they had begun to come into their own. They no longer feared their magic.

In fact, as the Oracle saw in his mind, they'd begun to use it in most creative ways. If only unwittingly, they'd even abused their powers. This by itself was not enough to furrow the Oracle's smooth forehead. But the brow of his adviser, Tibor, was another matter entirely. It had more than enough lines to make up for the ones the Oracle lacked.

As the Oracle projected his mind's images into different sectors of the Circle of Knowing, Tibor leaned over to view the scenes. In a brilliant shaft of green light, the petulant Guardian with the yellow hair was huddled at her desk over her homework.

The tiny girl, the one they called Hay Lin, was folding laundry for her mother in the silver beam of light.

The keeper of the Heart was getting into bed, a stuffed frog at her elbow.

All looked normal. But the Oracle knew that to be an illusion. Tibor, who'd been his adviser and his constant companion for centuries, sensed his lord's unease.

"Talk with me, Oracle," he said calmly, through his long, white beard.

"Good, Tibor," the Oracle said quietly, glancing up from the Guardians for a moment to give the old man a small smile. "You are aware of my gloomy thoughts. As you can see, the chosen ones have broken the laws of Candracar."

"I don't understand," Tibor said, scowling at the images. "They are simply living their lives."

"Those are not really the Guardians," the Oracle said. "What you see are magical creations. They call them astral drops."

Tibor shook his shaggy head in disbelief.

"They are perfect copies," he marveled. "The Guardians have become skillful with their magical powers."

"Don't praise them," the Oracle admonished. He floated a hand over the image of Will, making it large and three-dimensional. She was lying back in her bed, snuggling into her pillow. Her eyes closed, and a contented smile settled onto her face.

"It is their job to close the portals," the Oracle pointed out. "Not cross through them.

And that is what they have done – twice now!"

"Must you punish them?" Tibor asked.

"I have to make up my mind," the Oracle said. He closed his eyes and clasped his hands together in front of him. Despite the immortality of his body, his shoulders felt heavy. The decision would require much meditation.

"They are traveling through the land of Prince Phobos," the Oracle declared somberly.

"They are risking everything!" Tibor cried. "For what?"

The Oracle opened his eyes. Sadly, he waved his hand over Will's image again. It shimmered away. In its place appeared that of a blue-eyed girl. Though she was human, she wore the long robes of Phobos, emblazoned with the green-and-white seal of Phobos – a circle edged in spikes.

Her name was Elyon.

If only that young girl knew the truth, the Oracle thought.

But truth had nothing to do with what Elyon was discussing right then.

"You ask me why they take such risks, Tibor," the Oracle said. He gestured at the fluttery image of Elyon. "*She* will tell you."

Lo and behold, Elyon spoke. "Friendship!" she declared. She seemed to be answering Tibor's query. But in fact, she was addressing her prisoner and former friend – Taranee!

Taranee, still in her altered form – striped leggings, wild tendrils of hair, feathery wings, and all – was imprisoned in a bubble that floated in the center of an endless stone turret. The sunless chasm was chilly, so the young Guardian had conjured up a floating ball of fire to warm her hands.

Her back was defiantly turned to Elyon, who leered down at her from a niche carved into the turret wall.

"What does that word mean to you, Taranee?" Elyon challenged her prisoner.

"Definitely not the same thing that it means to you," Taranee spat. Though she answered, she refused to look at her captor.

"Those girls," Elyon said, her sly smile giving a slanted look to her pale blue eyes, "the ones you call friends. They've left you and created a perfect twin to take your place."

The Oracle felt Taranee's pain and doubt. He winced. Still, he continued to watch the scene play itself out.

Taranee glanced over her shoulder at Elyon and snapped, "That's not true."

"Look at the well, why don't you?" Elyon said. She fluttered her hand over her head. Suddenly a body of water appeared, suspended fifty feet above Taranee's floating prison. The water rippled and glistened, then grew as silvery as a movie screen. A wavering image of Taranee – the astral Taranee – appeared in the well. She was smiling with contentment as her mother kissed her on the cheek.

The Oracle felt Taranee's shock.

That's an astral drop, Taranee thought (and thus, the Oracle did, too). An astral drop who's taken my place at home. Taken my cosy bed. Taken my mother! While I sit here, forgotten.

The Oracle felt Taranee's mind swerve to Will.

Will hasn't abandoned me, she thought. I told her to leave me here. What good would it have done if all of us had been captured? Of course, she and the others are working to rescue me! Elyon's just trying to divide us.

"I've had enough of your devious tricks," Taranee announced. This time, she spun around in her bubble to stare Elyon down.

Little Taranee, the Oracle thought, once so

timid, so cowed by her magic, has found a source of strength within her – a fiery power. That is fortunate. She'll need it.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Taranee demanded of Elyon. "Why?"

"I'm wondering the same thing," said a silky voice behind Elyon.

"Cedric," Elyon gasped, spinning around.

With Elyon's back turned and her attention diverted, Taranee collapsed weakly to the cold, glassy floor of her bubble. If Elyon hadn't detected the psychic cost of Taranee's defiance, the Oracle had. The minutes stretched slowly inside her prison. Taranee's hope – and her faith in her friends – was faltering. Even Guardians could be weakened, and Taranee was spiraling towards despair.

The Oracle sighed.

There was nothing he could do for this young girl. She would have to find salvation within herself.

When he was sure that Taranee's heart was beating steadily – if quickly – the Oracle left her. His omniscient vision swerved into Elyon's head. There he found a chaos of cruelty and confusion, devotion mixed with longing.

Cedric glared down his aristocratic nose at little Elyon. He towered over her in his imposing cloak with its daggerlike epaulets. But his face was narrow and sharp-edged. His blue eyes sparkled icily.

Elyon gazed up at the man with an expression of slightly wary adoration. Her smug smile disappeared.

As he led Elyon away from the chasm, out of earshot of Taranee, Cedric said, "Explain, if you will, Elyon."

"Taranee is the weakest of the Guardians," Elyon said in a slightly trembly voice. "She's always been afraid of using her powers."

"And so?"

"Don't you understand?" Elyon said, without meeting Cedric's cold eyes. "I know how to get her on my side. On *our* side."

Cedric flicked a hank of his long, blond hair over his shoulder.

"Do as you like," he allowed. "But be careful. Taranee and her cage, her bubble, exist in tandem. She is at one with her prison. She could control it. But she doesn't know that."

"I know," Elyon said, a touch defensively. "But look at her."

Elyon and Cedric peered back down the dark, stone corridor. They could just barely glimpse Taranee's bubble. Inside, the Guardian was sobbing softly. The flame that crackled over her head was dimmed by her anguish.

The Oracle winced once again, but forced his mind to focus on Cedric's final words to his charge. "See to it that Taranee remains weak," he ordered Elyon. "Remain cautious. And try not to make her angry!"

As Cedric swept away down the hall, Elyon stood where she was, kneading her hands in anxiety. Then the Oracle felt her square her shoulders and get ready to face Taranee once more.

Meanwhile, Taranee was girding her strength as well. In fact, the Oracle could feel her sending telepathic messages out into the cosmos.

Will! Taranee was thinking urgently. Can you hear me, Will? I know you're somewhere. You . . . you *must* be there!

In Candracar, the Oracle clapped his hands together as he watched the girls. He couldn't help but feel proud of Taranee. Her hope was fading, he knew. But still, she persisted. She tried to connect with her friend.

Until, of course, she was interrupted by Elyon, who now appeared near her once again. Taranee's bubble floated very close to Elyon's perch. Elyon stared at the girl, her arms dangling impassively at her sides.

They really are like day and night, the Oracle thought. Taranee is all bright colours and passion. Elyon is pale and stoic in her long, white robe. And now, when they speak to one another, Taranee's voice trembles with feeling, while Elyon's is chilly and controlled.

"Hello, Taranee," Elyon said. "Have I come back at a bad time?"

Taranee was jolted out of her meditation. Then she whirled to face her captor.

"Elyon!" she yelled. "Are you here to tell me more lies?"

"No," Elyon said casually. "I just wanted to show you something. Something rather thought-provoking. Either you believe it or you don't."

Elyon waved her hand and, again, a bubbling mass of water appeared in the turret. This time, it roiled beneath Taranee's bubble. The Guardian peered down into it as an image began to form.

"Will!" Taranee cried as the picture solidified. She gaped at her friend, her . . . sleeping friend.

"Look how worried your friend is about your disappearance," Elyon said sarcastically. "Look how she's crying . . . thinking of you. . . ."

In Candracar, the Oracle sighed wearily. He glanced at the sundial built into an ornate archway at the entrance. Several earth minutes – and five Metamoorian hours – had passed since Elyon had begun tormenting Taranee. And Elyon – hardier than what her birdlike bones and wispy, straw-coloured hair revealed – was still at it. She was showing Taranee Will's progress through her morning.

It looked like an ordinary morning. Will arose from a warm bed, pulled on a pretty, pink shirt, and greeted a boy carrying a furry pet at the front door. The Oracle knew how much Taranee craved such mundane activities.

As the Oracle mused on this, he noticed a sudden shift of mood inside the Metamoorian turret.

With the appearance of the boy, Elyon had

fallen silent. The Oracle swooped into her thoughts.

What's Matt doing at Will's house?! she was wondering. Why does the lead singer of Cobalt Blue care about a little dormouse? And Will's a Sheffield newbie, to boot! *Sigh* . . . he's just as cute as he was the day I left Heatherfield . . . days . . . weeks ago? I don't even know anymore. . . .

Elyon shook her head, as if to clear it of fog.

With a breezy nonchalance, Will was planting a kiss on Matt's lips! Next, she slammed the door in his stunned face.

The exchange of affection piqued Taranee's interest, too. The Oracle swung to her mind. She was laughing inwardly.

I've got her, the Oracle heard Taranee think. I've got her! Then she turned to her captor.

"What's wrong, Elyon?" Taranee asked Elyon tauntingly. "Why did you stop talking?"

"Mind your own business," Elyon snapped, turning sideways so Taranee wouldn't see her pale cheeks and trembling lower lip. "You just do your own thinking! You'll

have plenty of time to do it, in your little bubble!"

"Will kissed Matt!" Taranee crowed. "And you have always had a crush on him."

"Shut up!" Elyon screamed. "No more!"

She spun around and disappeared, stomping down the hallway in anger.

For a moment, the Oracle felt triumph surge through Taranee's mind. But an instant later, her joy faltered. Next, it died, like a flame suddenly deprived of oxygen.

"Wait a minute," she whispered to herself. Tears welled up behind her round spectacles. "Elyon's really angry. Which means, what I've just seen – Will sleeping peacefully, Will kissing her crush – it's true! Will *has* forgotten about me!"

Taranee's shoulders began shaking with silent sobs.

As the Guardian wept, the Oracle transported his mind to Elyon, who was now stomping down a stone staircase. Cedric had appeared next to her again. His handsome countenance had disappeared, and he had taken on his snake form to hide his identity from the Guardians. His green chin jutted over

his broad chest. Behind a pulsing, red mask, his eyes were hardened like black pebbles. The snake-man gave the girl a mischievous look.

"So . . . Will has just snatched a kiss," Cedric said to Elyon. "The kiss you always dreamed about. Are you envious?"

Yes, yes, yes! the Oracle heard Elyon scream inside her head. My heart is breaking into a million little pieces.

But what she said, wanly and without much feeling, was, "N– no, not envious. I'm faithful to you, Cedric!"

"Good!" Cedric declared smugly. He knew Elyon was lying to him. He expected it. Cedric, the Oracle knew, trusted no one.

He doesn't need to, the Oracle thought with another anxious sigh. He has many, many sources of information. And clearly, one of them has filled him in on some important news.

"To reward you for your loyalty," Cedric declared to Elyon, "I'll let you know that she was not your real rival. The actual Will is here in Metamoor!"

TEN

Beep! Beep! Beeeeeeeep!

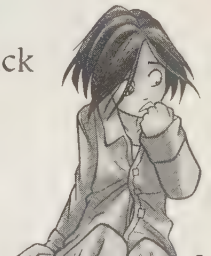
Astral Will's hand disentangled itself from the blanket and groped for the source of the extremely annoying sound.

Aarrgh, she thought. This Will's bedroom is not only very messy, it's noisy. I don't understand this incessant beeping! Let's consult my little paper. Now, where did I put it?

Groggily, Astral Will – who had begun to think of herself as A.W. – sat up in bed. She looked around the room. There were stuffed frogs everywhere! Sunlight streamed into the room through tall windows flanked by pink curtains.

"Where is that list?" she whispered.

A.W. felt the beep pounding at the back



of her head. So she turned around. She found herself staring at yet another frog. This one had a clock in its belly. Squeezing her fingers into a fist, she thunked the frog on its head.

The beeping stopped!

Sighing with relief, A.W. slumped back onto her pillow. Then she glanced at the nightstand next to her bed.

Oh, yeah, she thought. There's the list Will made me. I was going to look at it, wasn't I? Let's see. . . .

A.W. picked up the paper and scanned it for the words *horrible*, *annoying*, and *beeping*.

"Huh," she whispered. "Nothing here about beeping. I guess I'm supposed to keep snoozing, then. Cool!"

A.W. was just snuggling back under the covers when her eyes skimmed over the frog clock. Its small hand was on the seven, and its long hand was on the twelve.

Seven o'clock, A.W. thought dully, as she flopped her pillow over her head.

Wait a minute, she thought suddenly. Seven o'clock!

A.W. shot upright once again and gasped, "The list said that at seven o'clock, the real Will

gets up and goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth."

A.W. slumped to the bedroom door, rolling up the sleeves of her baggy, blue pyjamas.

Wonder where the bathroom is, she thought as she walked into the hall. She padded down the corridor, passing a kitchen. Once again, A.W. got distracted. First, she spied a table set with fresh-smelling bread, a crusty croissant, and a jar of chocolate spread. Then she noticed a slender woman in a pink bathrobe, slumped against the refrigerator. The woman unleashed a tremendous sneeze, then began talking into a phone with no cord.

"Yes, Amanda," she said in a very stuffy-sounding voice. "I've got a bad cold, so I'm going to stay home today. Could you cancel all my appointments?"

A.W. stared at the pretty woman for a moment. She felt some stir of familiarity in her gut, but maybe that was just the toast smell, making her hungry.

"Uh-huh, yes," the lady continued. "Tell Spencer to check the printouts and . . ."

Suddenly, the woman's big, brown eyes fell upon A.W. She gaped at her.

"Will, why are you still in your pyjamas?" she demanded.

"Uh, are you my mother?" A.W. responded.

The woman rolled her eyes. Then she turned her attention back to the phone.

"No, Amanda, I wasn't saying that to you," she said. "That was my daughter, who clearly is still mad at me for going on a date with her history teacher. I know – teenagers. So moody."

Uh, A.W. thought with a twinge, better keep moving. At least I know that she's Will's mother. I'm supposed to call her Mum. Now what was I doing? Oh, yes . . . the bathroom.

After scrubbing at her teeth and running a comb through her red hair, A.W. went back to Will's bedroom.

Now what? she thought wearily. Time to look at my directions.

A.W. scanned the room. Where was that paper? She walked over to the bed and peeked under the pillow. Then she pulled back the blankets. Then she looked under the bed. Then she searched under the desk, inside the closet, and in the toes of her bedroom slippers!

"I've lost it!" A.W. whispered in horror. She collapsed onto the bed and put a trembling finger to her chin. This was not good.

Okay, she told herself. Just try to remember what it said. At seven, wake up. Quarter past seven, brush my teeth and wash up. At seven-thirty, get dressed. At ten to eight, kiss . . . kiss. . . . Who am I supposed to kiss?

As she racked her brain, A.W. pulled a silky camisole out of a drawer and slipped it over her head. Then she shimmied into a pink shirt she found hanging in the closet. She was just fiddling with the pesky buttons when another noise filled the loft.

Dingdong.

That chime was much less irritating than the beeping, but still, it seemed to annoy the lady in the kitchen.

"Will," the lady called out.

Not the lady, A.W. reminded herself. Mum.

"Yes, Mum!" A.W. answered.

"Please answer the door," Mum yelled.

"Yes, yes," A.W. said. She padded back out of her bedroom. As she struggled with the buttons on her shirt, she noticed her bare legs.

My legs sure are skinny, she thought. And

brrr, they're cold. Maybe I should have put on some pants before answering the door. Oh, well. Now, how *do* you get these buttons closed?

A.W. reached the front door and pulled it open. Standing in front of her was a boy who was holding a scampery little dormouse. The boy had shaggy, brown hair and big, brown eyes and just the right amount of scruff on his chin. He inexplicably brought a goofy smile to A.W's face. Her heart quickened and her stomach went sort of bubbly.

I think Will must like this boy, A.W. thought. Which means I do, too! Very cool!

"Uh . . ." the boy stammered, "Will?"

"More or less," A.W. declared. "What do you want?"

The boy's startled gaze traveled from A.W.'s bare shoulder to her bare knees and back to her bare shoulder. Then he said, "Uh, I know you wanted me to watch your dormouse. But he kept my parents up all night. So I had to bring him back to you, ASAP."

The boy glanced apologetically at his watch.

"I realise it's only ten to eight," he said, "and you're not quite read– "

"What time?" A.W. cried. Ten to eight! she

thought. That was on the list! Right now, she was supposed to . . . oh, right!

"Thanks for the reminder," A.W. said. She took a step forward and put her hands on the boy's shoulders. She pulled him toward her and planted a firm kiss upon his lips.

A.W. was dimly aware of the fact that the boy's eyes were growing wide and googly. His arms fell to his sides, leaving the dormouse with nowhere to go but into A.W.'s arms. It leaped over to her, then scampered up to her shoulder.

"Thanks for the dormouse, too!" A.W. said, cooing to the little critter and grinning. Then she stepped back into the loft and shut the door in the flummoxed boy's face.

"Whoever you are," she added, as she walked back to Will's bedroom. "Now, what was next? . . . Oh, yes, pants!"

A.W. hurried to Will's closet and pulled out a pair of jeans. As she was stepping into them, Mum poked her head through the bedroom door.

"Yesterday, when I came home, you were Miss Sulky," she declared. "Well, today, I'm staying home. Are you happy?"

"Uh . . . no, Mum," A.W. ventured.

"What?" Mum said. "Is this the same Will who's always complaining that I work too much?"

"Okay, so, yes, Mum," A.W. declared. "Is that better? Jeez!"

Before Mum could reply, the dormouse skittered across A.W.'s shoulders and jumped onto the bed.

"Wait!" A.W. cried, chasing the little thing as it scrambled under the blankets. A.W. burrowed into the bed after it. She found herself blinking at both the dormouse – and her list!

"Ah, here it is!" A.W. exclaimed. When she emerged from under the covers, her mother had left the room. A.W. sighed with relief and scanned Will's instructions.

"Oops," she whispered. "At ten to eight, I was supposed to kiss Mum, not that boy. And . . . uh-oh! Number one on the list of *Don'ts* was *Don't kiss any boys!*"

A.W. stared blankly at the wall. She'd done something wrong. But she didn't know what to do about it! There was nothing on Will's list about remedying big, fat mistakes.

A.W. thought for a moment. Or rather, she

got as close to thinking as her astral drop mind would allow. Then she snapped her fingers.

Wait a minute, she thought. Mum just said she's staying home. For me! And what else do mums do? They provide guidance. They tell you what to do. Perfect!

A.W. walked back down the hall, zipping her jeans as she went. She peeked into the kitchen, where the real Will's mother was pulling a thermometer from her mouth and examining it.

"Mum?" she queried. "Have you ever been kissed by mistake?"

"What a question," Mum said. "No. But if I had been, that kind of mistake would have been paid back with a slap!"

"Uh-huh," A.W. replied. She frowned for a moment in thought. Then she nodded and looked at her watch. Uh-oh! She was going to be late for class at the Sheffield Institute! She dashed to the front door and slipped her feet into some lug-soled leather shoes. Then she pulled her grey coat from its hook.

"Will," Mum said. "Can you slow down for a minute? I want to tell you something."

"Not now, Mum," A.W. replied. "I have to

make sure I stay on schedule!"

"You have a schedule?" Mum asked with a bemused smile. "Yet it takes a cannon shot to get you up in the morning."

"Ah, that *beep-beep-beep*," A.W. said with a nod. "So that was a cannon shot! I'll have to make a note of that."

Mum got a funny look on her face. Then she noticed that A.W. was struggling with the zipper on her jacket. She zipped it up. She zipped it down. She zipped it up. She zipped it down. But the darned thing just stayed open!

"Let me do that," Mum said, walking over to A.W. She hooked the end of the jacket's zipper into a little slot. This time, the jacket zipped up and stayed closed.

"Cool," A.W. breathed.

"So, when you get home tonight," Mum said, "there'll be a dinner guest here."

"Uh-huh," A.W. said absently. Her eyes had just fallen upon the fragrant spread on the table. "Hey, is that croissant for me?"

A.W. dashed over to the table and took a quick bite of the flaky, crescent roll. *Yummmmm –*

"The thing is . . ." Mum said, with a mix-

ture of nervousness, apology, and defiance. "Our guest is going to be Mr. Collins."

A.W. looked at Mum quizzically.

"So?" she asked, a few crumbs spraying from her mouth as she did.

"Maybe you're not understanding me," Mum said carefully. She gave A.W. a hard look. "We're talking about *the* Mr. Collins. Your history teacher."

"Good!" A.W. said. As she stuffed the last morsel of croissant into her mouth, she nodded with satisfaction. Maybe she'd get this Mr. Collins to help her with Will's history homework, which was probably hard and boring. Will would be pleasantly surprised when she returned!

"Have fun!" A.W. added, giving Will's mum a thumbs-up.

"Have . . . fun?" Mum sputtered back. She gave A.W. another strange look.

I wonder what that means, A.W. thought. Perhaps I've done the wrong thing again?

But before she had a chance to ponder that idea, or check Will's list one more time, she glanced down at her watch.

Oooh, only ten minutes to ride Will's red

bike to school, she thought. Must dash!

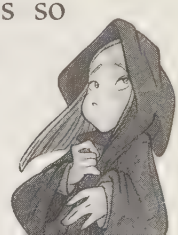
With that, A.W. put a big smile on her face and grabbed the bike out of the foyer of the loft. She flung open the front door and plunged further into Will Vandom's day. After the morning's adventures, she was sure everything else would be a piece of cake. She still didn't know why Will had been so uptight. But, she wondered as she pedaled to school, I do hope I'm going in the right direction.

ELEVEN

Cornelia and her fellow Guardians were tromping up yet another cobblestoned Metamoorian street, skulking in the shadows of yet more gloomy, imposing houses.

I wonder how long we've been here, Cornelia thought with a sigh. If only we could use our powers to find the castle we saw on Irma's map. Hay Lin could fly us there on a pillow of air. Or Irma could create a river that would float us there. Or I could coax the trees to pass us from branch to branch until we reached the castle, well rested and fresh as daisies.

The image of tree branches bouncing the girls across the land of Metamoor was so comical Cornelia almost laughed out lou



There was just one catch. She was way too tired and cranky to laugh.

"Irma," she finally said impatiently. "Lemme see that map of Metamoor again. I want to know if we're even remotely closer to Phobos's castle. We've been searching for hours."

"All right, all right," Irma said. She began to rummage around inside her brown cloak. But she froze when a voice rang out in the street.

"There she is!"

Irma gasped and looked up.

"There *he* is," she cried.

Cornelia and her friends followed Irma's gaze. And what they discovered was *not* good.

A big, brooding, blue-skinned brute with red, greasy hair and a serious underbite was pointing at Irma.

And the guy's not alone, Cornelia thought desperately. He's got about *twenty-five* green-skinned soldiers with him!

"Yikes!" Irma squealed. She turned on her heel and started running down the street.

"C'mon!" she screamed over her shoulder to her friends.

They began pounding after her.

And then, the hulking, scaly army began pounding after them!

"Okay, Irma!" Will demanded between huffs and puffs. "Who's that guy? And more importantly, who's his army?"

"He's the vendor who sold me the map," Irma cried.

Hay Lin was running next to Irma.

"Obviously, he wasn't satisfied with your watch!" she said, scowling suspiciously.

"I don't know why not!" Irma declared. "It's perfectly decent. I found it in the bottom of a cereal box."

"Ugh!" Cornelia said in disgust. Then she saw a staircase that veered off the narrow street.

"Up there!" she screamed.

Will was the first to veer off and begin racing up the stairs. Even though the girls were running for their lives, Cornelia couldn't help but smile a tight, satisfied smile. For once, Will had followed her lead. So, why not try again?

"Will," she gasped as they hurried up the stairs. "Don't you think it's time to transform ourselves?"

"No," Will said, with a quick shake of her

head. "The right moment hasn't come yet."

"What?!" Cornelia yelled. "Listen. You may hold the Heart of Candracar, but you're talking about *our* lives here!"

"I didn't ask for this responsibility," Will declared, shooting Cornelia a surly glance. "But since I *am* the keeper of the Heart, there's nothing you can do but follow me."

Cornelia was about to hurl a nasty retort at Will. But before she had the chance, the Guardians reached the top of the stairs.

They stopped cold.

They had arrived at the top of a landing – surrounded on three sides by looming, windowless walls. It was a dead end!

A dead end that *I* led us to, Cornelia thought with a gasp. Um, maybe Will has a point. For once, Cornelia felt grateful that the other girls were looking to Will for guidance. Because, frankly, Cornelia had *no* idea how they were going to get out of this fix.

Especially with an army gaining on them every second.

"I hear them coming!" Irma squeaked, peeking over her shoulder at the staircase. Cornelia, too, could hear the rumble of angry

voices and the thunder of dozens of feet. (Were they hooves? Claws?! Cornelia wondered desperately.)

Will stared in complete shock at the unclimbably smooth walls towering above them.

"A staircase that ends in a blank wall?" she breathed. "How is that possible?"

A raspy voice suddenly echoed out of nowhere.

"Everything is possible, here in Metamoor," the voice declared.

Cornelia looked wildly around the alley.

"Wha – aahhh!" she screeched.

The voice had come from a *hand* – a fleshy hand clad in what looked like brown armadillo skin. The hand was not attached to an arm or any other body part. It jutted out of one of the stone tiles of the landing's floor, like a wild weed that had taken root in a cement sidewalk.

The hand's plump forefinger waggled, beckoning the girls towards it. Then it pointed downwards at a square of darkness on the floor. The whole landing was cloaked in shadow, but this particular part was pitch-black.

"You have no alternative," the creepy voice declared. "Enter the shadow now!"

Will cast a wild, fearful look at her fellow Guardians. Then she glanced over her shoulder. Cornelia followed her gaze. The leader of the pack of soldiers was only about twenty steps behind them.

"I saw them," he growled to the soldiers behind him. "They're up there!"

"The hand is right," Will said, shaking her head in disbelief even to be uttering such a ridiculous phrase. "We have no other choice."

Without another word, Will ran three steps and jumped onto the black square.

Make that *into* the black square. Will plunged through the floor as if it were made of paper. Suddenly, she was gone!

The remaining Guardians gave each other quick glances. Then Irma started running. Hay Lin was on her heels. And Cornelia was right behind her!

Hop! Skip! Jump!

Cornelia was the last to plunge into the shadow. She felt herself falling swiftly. But it wasn't a hurl-inducing free fall. Instead, Cornelia felt something buoying her up, like a

virtual parachute, or some sort of safety net.

Whatever the force was, it allowed Cornelia to land on another cold, stone floor as delicately as a bird. In the pitch-dark, Cornelia blindly felt around for her friends.

"Are we all here?" Will asked.

"Here!" Hay Lin piped.

"Me, too," Irma said.

"And me," Cornelia answered. "Now, the real question is, are those guys going to be joining us, too?"

Together, the Guardians held their breath and braced themselves for the roar of soldiers tumbling after them. But a few moments of silence convinced Cornelia, at least, that they were safe.

Relatively safe, anyway.

"I can't believe this," Irma said.

Suddenly, the rumbly voice – the voice of the hand that had spoken to the girls up on the landing – pierced the darkness.

"Forget the laws of physics that regulate your world, Irma," it said.

"How do you know my name?" Irma cried into the blackness.

"Wait a minute," Will said. "That voice . . ."

A dull, white light erupted in the center of the shadow. The light emanated from a small, glowing pyramid. And that pyramid rested on the hand of–

"Mrs. Rudolph!" the four Guardians cried. They blinked in shock at their maths-teacher-turned-monster. She was still in her Metamoorian shape. Jutting out of her long, red dreadlocks were wide, floppy ears. Her face had a mass of crusty jowls and in its center, a squashy snout. Dotting her fleshy neck were three red horns. Her eyes were blood-red. But they were also, strangely, kind.

As were Mrs. Rudolph's words.

"I don't want to harm you, even if I should be angry with you," she announced, holding her source of light out toward the girls. "You forced me to abandon my home on earth. But . . . well, you're still my former students, and I still care."

With gratitude in her voice, Will said, "You move well in the dark. Is this where you live now?"

"This is not the dark," Mrs. Rudolph retorted. She let the pyramid go free, and it floated from her hand. It drifted out in front of her

and began bobbing away. Mrs. Rudolph followed its light and the Guardians, followed her in silence.

"This is only Metamoor's immense underworld," the teacher explained.

Cornelia gazed above her. Mrs. Rudolph was right. They were surrounded by tall pillars and hardy crossbeams – an entire infrastructure that must have been supporting the city up above.

"You're hiding down here," Will said to their teacher quietly. "Just like you hid in our world. But from what?"

Over the dull glow of the pyramid, Mrs. Rudolph addressed the girls, with weariness in her red eyes and in her voice.

"There's a cloud that covers our sky and the hearts of our people," she said sorrowfully. "We are millions of black hearts. Anger. Desperation. This is Metamoor. This is the true darkness."

Cornelia hung her head. Mrs. Rudolph's despair was infectious. But then a thundering boom made her, and everyone else in their crew, jump! And then it came again!

Ftoooom!

Okay, Cornelia thought drily. So much for our soulful moment. Can't a Guardian get a moment of silence ever?

FTOOOOOM!

The noise was stronger now. Its thunder echoed through the cavernous space.

"Those *booms* are not a good thing," Mrs. Rudolph said gravely. "What shall we do? You must decide quickly. Even in Metamoor, time does catch up with you."

"What do you mean by that?" Will asked her. "Is time different in Metamoor?"

"Why, yes," Mrs. Rudolph said. "In this prisonlike world, time passes much more slowly than it does on earth."

"What?" Will squeaked. "So, one earth day equals how much Metamoor time?"

"One or perhaps two weeks," Mrs. Rudolph said, shrugging her plump shoulders.

"Taranee!" Will wailed, clapping her hand to her forehead. "I've left her in the hands of those monsters for all that time?"

Once again, Cornelia didn't envy Will her position of leadership. She even sympathised with her. Her belief that Will was to blame for Taranee's predicament was definitely receding

as their own present situation veered further and further out of their control.

Down here, Cornelia thought desperately, "control" is a fantasy. Who knows what to expect next?

FTOOOOOMMM!

Well, maybe I *do* know what to expect next, Cornelia thought, as the *boom* rang in her ears. Another confrontation. Another flight from death!

Meanwhile, Mrs. Rudolph had laid a crusty hand on Will's shoulder.

"Don't blame yourself," she was saying to her. "You couldn't know."

Suddenly, Hay Lin stepped toward the teacher.

"My question is, how do *you* know?" she demanded coldly. "How do you know why we're here? Who are you, really?"

Cornelia blinked in surprise at Hay Lin's display of suspicion.

Of course, I guess I would be doubtful, too, Cornelia thought, if the last time I'd seen Mrs. Rudolph, she'd tied *me* up and thrown me in the closet.

Because that's exactly what Mrs. Rudolph

had done when she'd caught Hay Lin and Irma sneaking around her house. It had been a desperate effort on Mrs. Rudolph's part to avoid being discovered as an earth intruder. But the effort had failed when Will had discovered her friends and rescued them with the Heart of Candracar's magic. That was the reason Mrs. Rudolph had fled to Metamoor.

But now, the teacher was not going to be cowed. After all, this was her turf. So, she merely gave Hay Lin an impassive gaze and announced, "Today's lesson has come to an end, girls. The bell is ringing."

Mrs. Rudolph began to shimmer away! In an instant, she'd evaporated, like a puff of steam. And the moment she was gone, another *ftoooom* rang through the underworld. The girls dodged a sudden shower of rocks, which was followed by a shaft of light.

FTOOOOOOMMMM!

Terrified, Cornelia clung to her friends and peered upwards. A large hole was breaking through the ceiling. Peering down through that opening were the venomous snake-creature and his blue sidekick, Vathek!

Cornelia cringed and got ready to scream.

But then she realised something.

When Mrs. Rudolph had disappeared, she'd taken her glowing pyramid with her. Once again, the Guardians were cloaked in darkness. As long as they stayed away from the shafts of sunlight shining down into their hiding place, they were as good as invisible!

That is, *if* everyone stayed quiet.

"Ah– " Irma began to scream. Cornelia reached over and clapped her hand over Irma's mouth. "Shhhh," she whispered to all the girls. "Let's hear what the bad guys have to say."

They didn't have to wait long. Vathek let forth a guttural laugh and announced, "Ha! I've opened a crevice."

"Wonderful work, Vathek," the snake-man replied calmly. Cornelia watched his face contort itself into a ghastly grin as he peered down into the darkness. "Now, all we have to do is find them!"

TWELVE

Deep within the shadows of Metamoor's underworld, Will clutched at her friends in terror. The snake-man and Vathek were lurking above them, threatening to drop down upon them at any minute.

Once again, we're in hiding, Will thought.

And once again, we're fleeing.

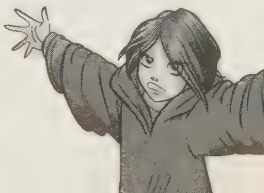
Will hung her head and heaved a shuddery sigh.

When will this end? she wondered desperately. When we're sitting in a cell next to Taranee?

Suddenly, she gasped.

Hey . . . she thought.

She turned to her friends and whispered to them excitedly: "I have an idea.



It seems like a crazy one, but you'll have to trust me. Are you with me?"

"Of course," Hay Lin squeaked into the darkness.

"You got it," Irma said.

From Cornelia, there was a skeptical silence. Will held her breath. If Cornelia refused, her plan couldn't possibly work. She braced herself for one of Cornelia's trademark barbs, or a shrill argument. But what she got instead was so surprising it moved her almost to tears.

Cornelia reached out through the blackness and found Will's hand – her right hand, the one that housed the Heart of Candracar. She squeezed it. And then, the most reluctant Guardian uttered one simple word.

"Yes."

"All right!" Will whispered. "Follow me."

The girls began creeping up a long stairway that seemed to be leading directly to the ugly gash Vathek had made in the ceiling. Will swallowed hard as the Guardians got closer to the light. With every step, her fear intensified.

But when she saw the giant, long-chinned serpent at the top of the stairs, her fear melted

away. It was replaced by a wave of pure and absolute anger.

"So," the snake-creature was saying to his craggy, blue henchman. "We'll go down there and search."

The lump in Will's throat dissolved. In fact, with her friends behind her, she felt as though she could let forth a shout that all of Metamoor would hear. But she didn't have to. The beast's slithery tail was only inches from her face. So, Will merely announced, "Don't bother! We're right here."

The serpentine creature turned to gape at her. His eyes narrowed behind his red mask.

"You!" he growled.

"We have nothing to say to each other," Will said. She heard the other girls catch their breath behind her. She knew they were wondering *how* this could be a good idea. But she pressed on: "If you care to do anything to us, do it now!"

"Don't mind if I do," the creature said with a casual cackle. He waved his scaly hand at the girls. Will gasped as she felt her feet fly out from under her. Then she caught herself, just before her face banged into a pane of glass that

had suddenly popped up before her.

In fact, the glass had formed a sphere all around her. She was floating in a bubble! But this one wasn't soft and pliant like the air bubble Irma had created for them. It was cold and smooth and flawless. It was also, Will realised as she pounded on the hard surface with her fists, impenetrable.

There was another difference, too. While the four Guardians had shared Irma's air bubble, now each one hovered – eyes wide with terror – in a spherical cage of her own.

"Here are your prisons, Guardians," he said to the girls with a menacing cackle.

In response, Will just glared at the monster. In the bubble cage next to hers, she saw frantic tears welling up in Hay Lin's eyes. Irma was speechless. She simply clutched her knees within her bubble and shivered.

The villain laughed at their fear. But the grotesque Vathek, peering into their glass cages with his beady little eyes, seemed utterly bewildered.

"I don't understand," he said to his master. "Why did they allow themselves to be captured so easily?"

"This world is immense," his master replied dismissively. "They have chosen the fastest route to a reunion with Taranee."

Will gasped. How could this beast have known? And now, her friends knew her plan also. She snuck shy glances at them.

Hay Lin's tears had dried. She flashed Will a defiant smile! Irma gave Will a thumbs-up. Even Cornelia arched her eyebrows in surprise. She was impressed! Will couldn't help smiling for a split second.

Of course, the feel-good moment lasted only for a second. Then the creature stepped in, as usual, with a buzz kill.

"I will grant you your wish," he said, swooping his snaky head down to make eye contact with Will. "And *you*, Will, shall give me the Heart of Candracar!"

Never, Will thought. But again, she refused to speak. Ignoring her silence, the towering villain rose up on his curly tail and announced: "First, though, there is someone who wants to see you personally."

He waved a meaty green arm, and suddenly Will was knocked off balance again! Her bubble, along with those of her friends, began

skidding forward on a swath of whiteness. It was . . . snow!

We're on a sleigh ride, now? Will thought indignantly.

"What's happening?" she asked, as the girls sped through the snow. The snake-creature zipped along next to them, moving dozens of yards forward with every flick of his powerful tail. "Where are you taking us?"

"Nowhere," the monster spat. "The place you are about to see is denied to you. This is only a projection of . . . Phobos's garden."

As the words left the creature's mouth, the girls' bubbles swooped up off the ground. The blinding whiteness of the snow disappeared and was replaced with visions of such colour, and such scope, that Will could only blink at them in disbelief!

The Guardians' bubbles bobbled by a tree with a hundred sinuous trunks. Burnt-orange ferns waved and bowed. The Guardians saw mushrooms of the deepest burgundy; flowers that looked like ruffled lions' manes; sunflowers with petals of scarlet; eggplant-coloured rocks.

"It's . . . it's . . ." Irma stammered.

"It's useless to try to define it," the snake-man said with a leer. "Everything here is inspired by pure perfection."

"If it's so perfect," Will retorted, "then why do I have the creeps?"

It was true. Though her bubble was no longer skimming through snow, Will was still cold. Sadness dappled the flowers as surely as did sunlight. And, somehow, Will could feel that melancholy herself.

"Maybe you're scared because everything you see is *lethal*," the snake-man sneered. "Now, be quiet. Here they are. The Murmurers!"

The what? Will thought.

"These are the members of Phobos's court," the monster continued. "They are the voices and eyes of the prince of princes!"

The snake-creature clamped his thin-lipped mouth shut. For a moment, the garden was silent. But then, Will heard a low humming. No, not a humming. A hissing. A . . . whisper!

"*You . . . Guardians . . .*" hundreds of otherwordly voices said. "*You Guardians . . . earth . . . Guardians . . . earth . . .*"

Will gasped. Figures were beginning to unfurl from the flowers! An elfin, golden creature with long fingers and hair like Spanish moss emerged from beneath a yellow stone. A sinuous blue female stepped from a bell-like bloom. Everywhere, the Murmurers were crawling into the open. This one with gleaming purple skin, that one with a long, turquoise mane, and still another with a body that was the bark of a tree.

"Their voices are barely whispers," Hay Lin exclaimed, as the creatures continued to murmur. "They're almost thoughts."

"What you see dims your other senses," the villain said. "Close your eyes and listen."

Though she was loath to do the snake-creature's bidding, Will was too curious to refuse the order. She squeezed her eyes shut. The murmurs swirled into her head.

"You, earth Guardians . . . not worthy to approach us . . . may your end be quick. . . . May the Oracle learn to respect us. . . ."

As the whispers drifted away, Will's eyes opened. She watched the Murmurers retreat back into their foliage.

"I don't understand," she cried.

"It's not important that you understand," the beast said. "What *is* important is that they have seen you. And now, you will see something else – the prison of Metamoor!"

Will cringed as their bubbles went for yet another swooping ride. But she barely had a chance to find her balance in her spherical cage before it came to a halt again. The four Guardians found themselves floating in a line in a tall turret constructed of stone bricks. The seemingly endless walls were interrupted at points by tall, arched niches.

"What a dreary place," Irma declared, gazing sullenly through her glass walls. "I bet those beauties in the garden don't know anything about it."

"They do not exist to live in Phobos's castle," the evil reptile-man said. He was looming before the girls, glaring down at them from a great height. "They live beyond its walls."

"And you?" Will said tauntingly. "Where is your place?"

"Here, for now," the snake-faced man responded. "Until, that is, you hand over the Heart of Candracar. Save yourself from the suffering you'll endure if you refuse!"

"Forget it!" Will answered, turning her back. A moment later, she heard a reply. But it didn't come from the snake-creature. The voice was thin, girlish, and full of sarcasm.

"Wrong answer, Will!"

Will gasped.

Elyon! she thought. She spun around and stared at her former friend, who was walking into the turret from a long, dark hallway. Both her white cloak and her icy eyes made Will shiver.

But the thing hovering near Elyon made Will positively jump. It was another prison bubble. And floating within it was a girl with shiny black tendrils of hair and big, round glasses. She wore purple-and-turquoise leggings. And on her back, which was turned to Will, were a pair of sagging, despondent wings.

"Taranee!" Will screamed.

"Yes!" Elyon declared.

Out of the corner of her eye, Will saw the beast slither over to Elyon and hiss at her angrily. But Elyon just grinned and pointed smugly at Will.

Will didn't stop to wonder what the villains were whispering about. She had eyes for only

one person.

"Taranee!" she cried to her friend's rounded back. "Talk to us. How are you?"

Cornelia reached out to Taranee anxiously.

"Don't you want to see us?" she asked.

Taranee clapped her hands over her ears. Then, at last, she twisted around in her bubble to face her fellow Guardians. But instead of relief or gratitude, Will was shocked to see an unexpected emotion on Taranee's face – absolute rage!

"Quiet!" Taranee screamed at Will. "I don't want to listen to you! I don't ever want to see you again!"

THIRTEEN

Taranee gazed at the four girls, floating before her in bubble cages just like hers.

But they're *not* just like me, she thought angrily. I was loyal to them. I let myself be captured for them.

And what did they do? They went off and forgot about me. They left me to suffer in this tower with Elyon.

Taranee stared at her jailer. Elyon's pale eyes were slanting upward in a mischievous smile. She was relishing Taranee's pain. And that was when Taranee realised what Elyon was doing. She had conjured up those apparitions of Taranee's friends – so close yet so far away – to torture her. Well, Taranee wasn't falling for it anymore.

"You're not real!" she screamed at her fellow Guardians. She hoped her voice sounded strong, despite the great fear and disappointment she felt. "You're just images – artificial images! And I'm tired of seeing you. Go away! Just go away!"

"But, Taranee," Will gasped. "We– "

"Stop your tricks!" Taranee begged Elyon, clamping her hands over her ears again and squeezing her eyes shut. "I'll do anything you want, as long as you take me far away from here, right now!"

Taranee peeked through her fingers at Elyon to see if, for once, her mean, former friend would be merciful. But Elyon was paying no attention to Taranee. Instead, she had stomped over to Will's bubble.

"Do you hear that?" she asked Will tauntingly. "When I have finished with you, you will give us what we want – the Heart of Candracar!" The young girl's face was full of hate *and* satisfaction.

"You'll pay for this, Elyon!" Will spat back, pounding her hands on the bubble's glasslike walls.

"And *you* will grow old in this prison,"

Elyon told Will. "You will never kiss your precious Matt again."

"If that's what you're worried about," Will said, "you can rest easy. The guy barely knows I'm a girl!"

Taranee blinked. Through the haze of her anger and anguish, she thought she'd heard Will say – Wait a minute!

"But I saw you!" Taranee declared, pointing at Will.

Now it was Will's turn to look confused. She and Elyon both stared at Taranee with mouths agape.

"Matt!" Taranee continued. "I saw you kiss him!"

"What?" Will cried, blushing deeply. "No! I've never kissed Matt!"

Suddenly, the snake-man slithered forward.

"Elyon," he growled. "Take Taranee away!"

Elyon scurried over to Taranee's floating bubble and began moving it toward the turret door. But before they reached it, they were stopped by Will's screech: "Wait!"

Will gazed at Taranee. And now, finally, Taranee allowed herself to meet Will's gaze. In

her friend's eyes, Taranee saw confusion. And desperation. And . . . affection?

"Elyon played a trick on you!" Will cried. "You saw my twin – my astral drop – on earth! It didn't really happen!"

Taranee bit her lip. Could she believe Will? Or was it Will's astral drop who was saying those things? Elyon had Taranee's head spinning so fast she couldn't even begin to sort out who was who, or what was what!

Will – if that really was Will, Taranee thought – made one more attempt to reach her.

"If you don't believe me," Will said, "read my mind."

Elyon huffed impatiently. "Taranee– "

"Stop," Taranee growled, holding up one hand. She said the word with such power that Elyon *did* stop.

"Will is telling the truth!" Taranee said. "Only the real Will knows I'm telepathic!"

As she said the words, Taranee gazed into Will's brown eyes, which were beginning to fill up with grateful tears. The two Guardians – and best friends – faced each other in silence for a moment. Almost imperceptibly, Will nodded.

And in that one small but heartfelt gesture,

she spoke to Taranee. Silently, she praised Taranee for her strength. And she assured her that her ordeal – this particular trial, anyway – would be over soon. And she told Taranee that she had faith in her.

Will's friendship suffused Taranee with the first warmth she'd felt since entering her cell.

Looking around, Taranee felt her strength return. Her friends, her fellow Guardians, had come all this way to save her. Knowing that they had risked their lives, willingly facing danger, for her made Taranee's whole being warm with happiness.

A moment later, that warmth deepened – to fire. To wrath! Taranee turned inside her bubble to face her jailer, her tormenter – the cruel, cold Elyon.

"You have played with my feelings, Elyon," Taranee said. She pressed at the walls of her bubble with her magical hands. As she did, she felt the glassy substance begin to change! It warmed under her touch. It grew more pliant, more permeable. The magic was having an effect.

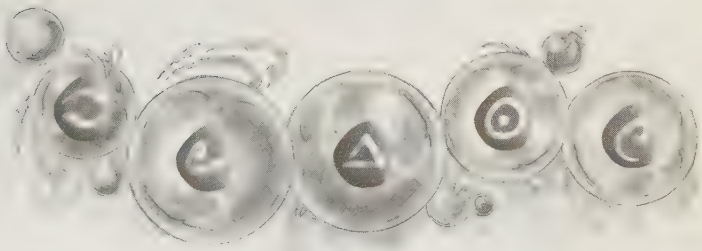
"But nobody," Taranee continued threateningly, "should be allowed to play with *fire*!"

Whoooooosh!

Bursts of bright orange magic shot out from Taranee's palms. She arched her back and kicked out with her legs. And then she *broke* through the walls of her bubble! She was free! She soared through the air in a whirl of fire, preparing herself to face Elyon and the other enemies of the Guardians.

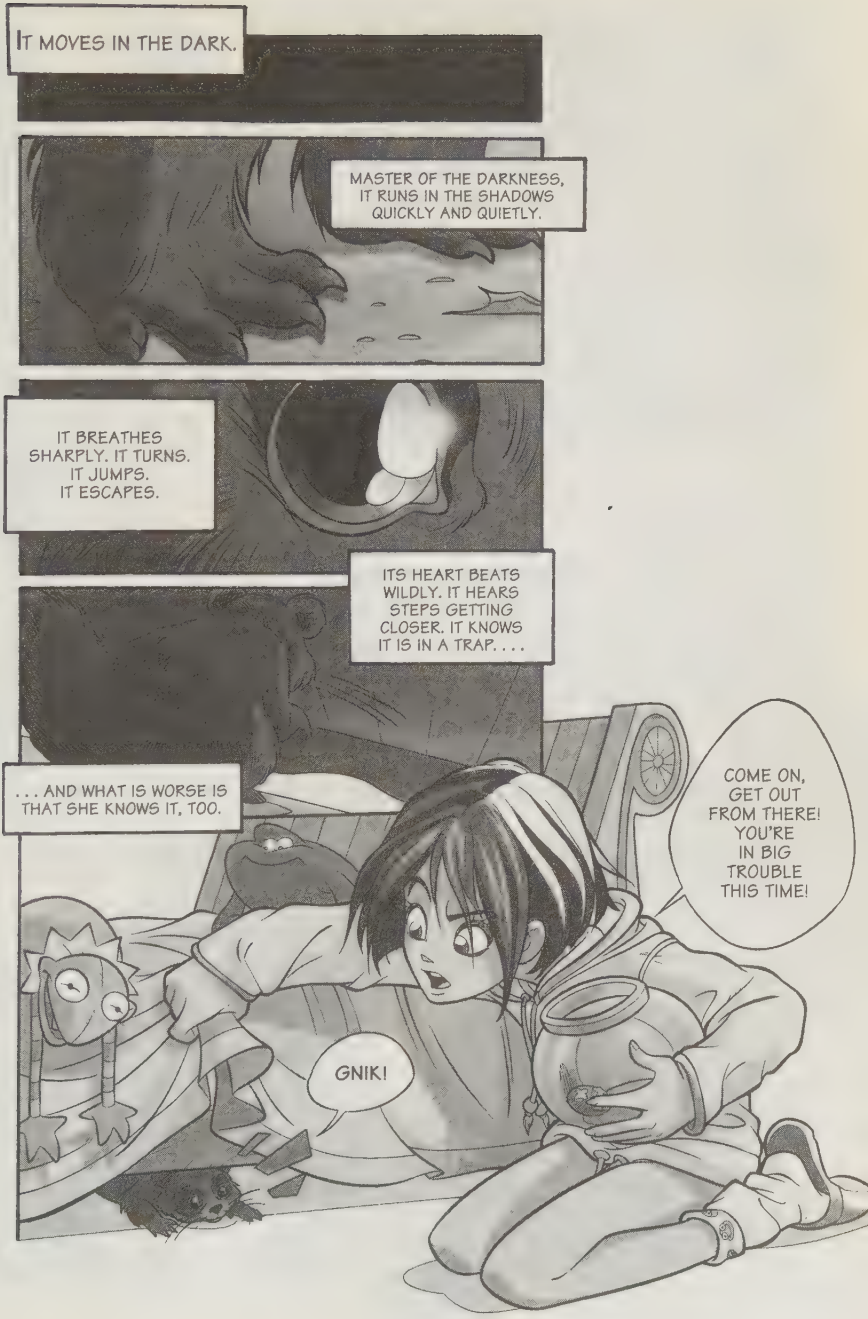
My captors, Taranee thought with rabid glee, are in for the fight of their lives! With my friends at my side, there's nothing I can't do!

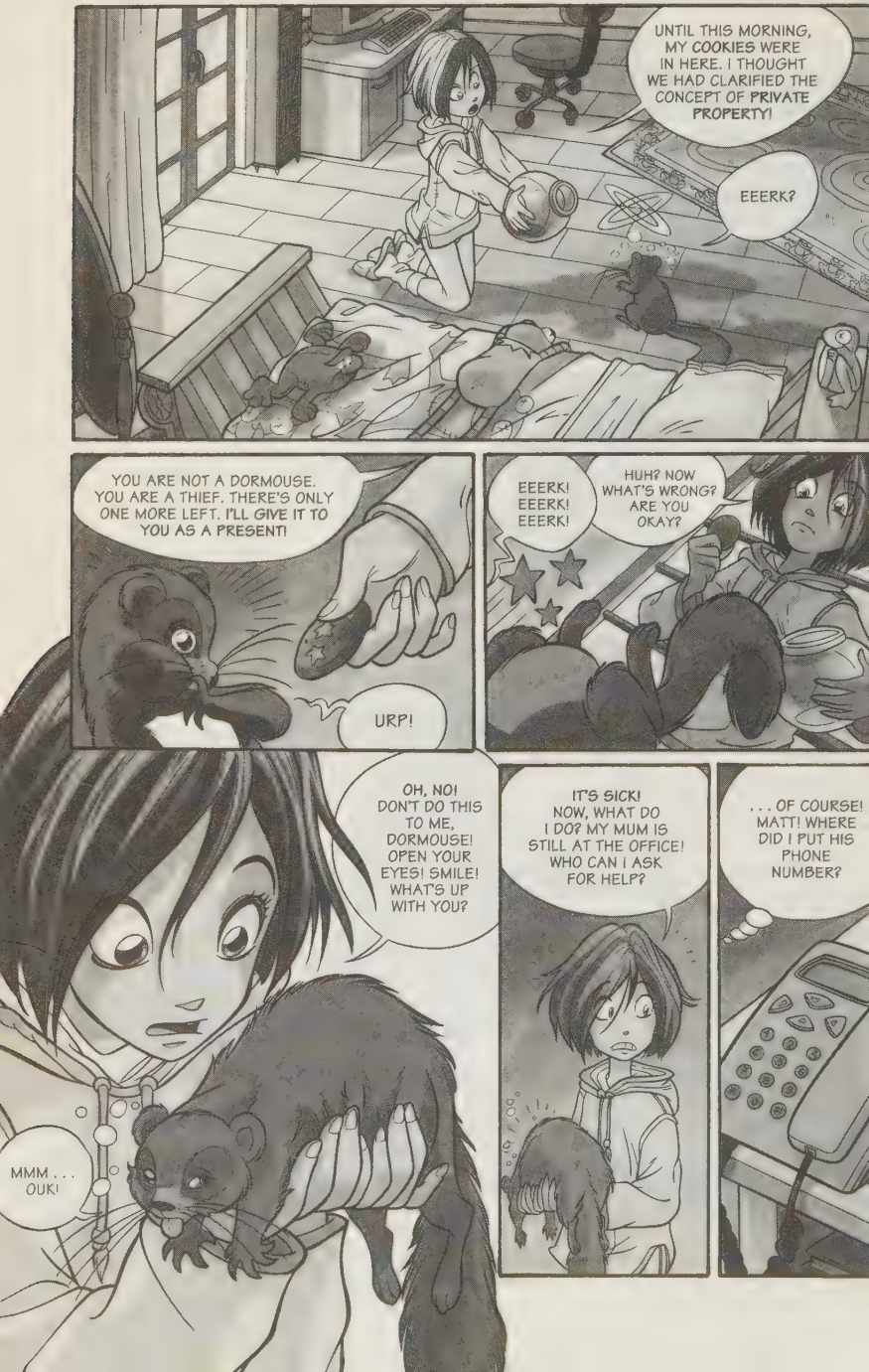
The Last Tear

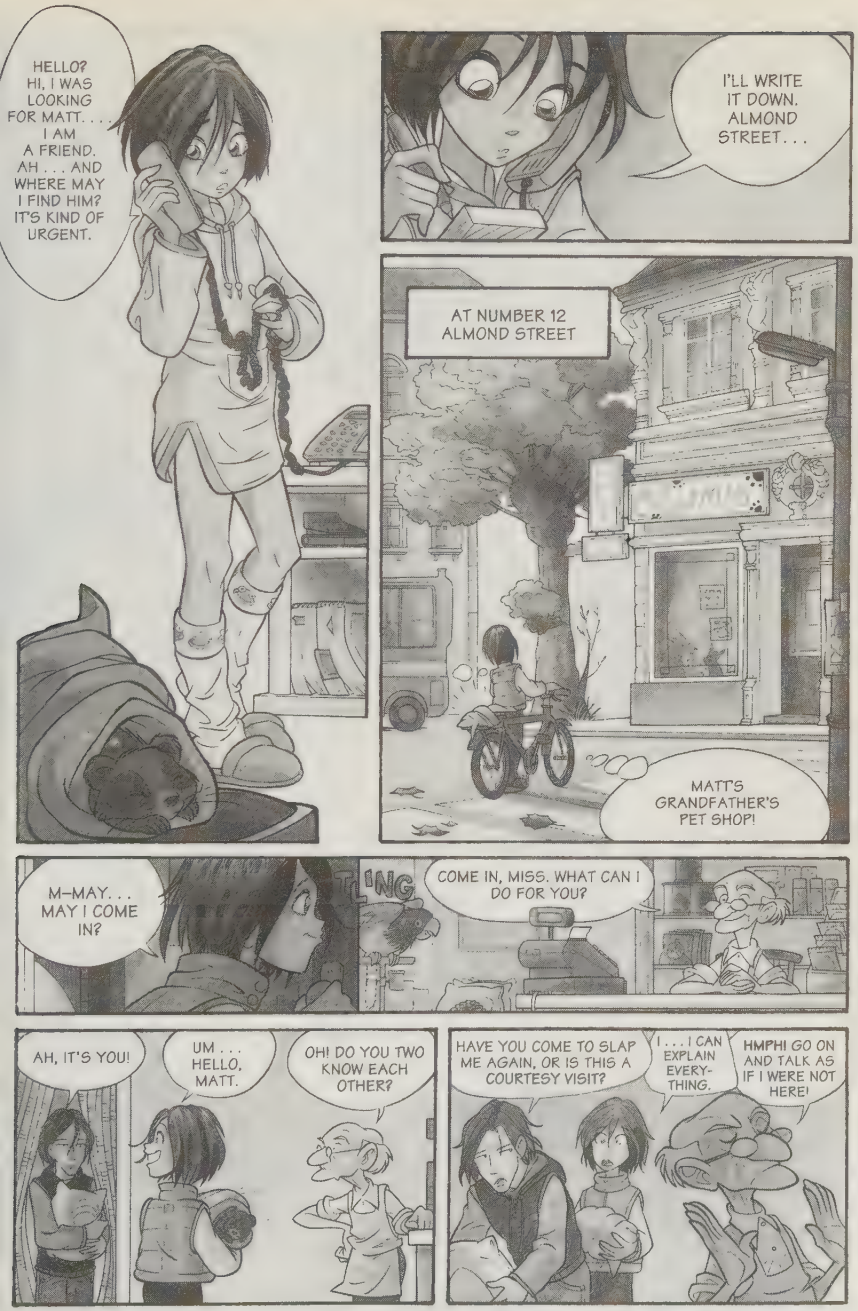


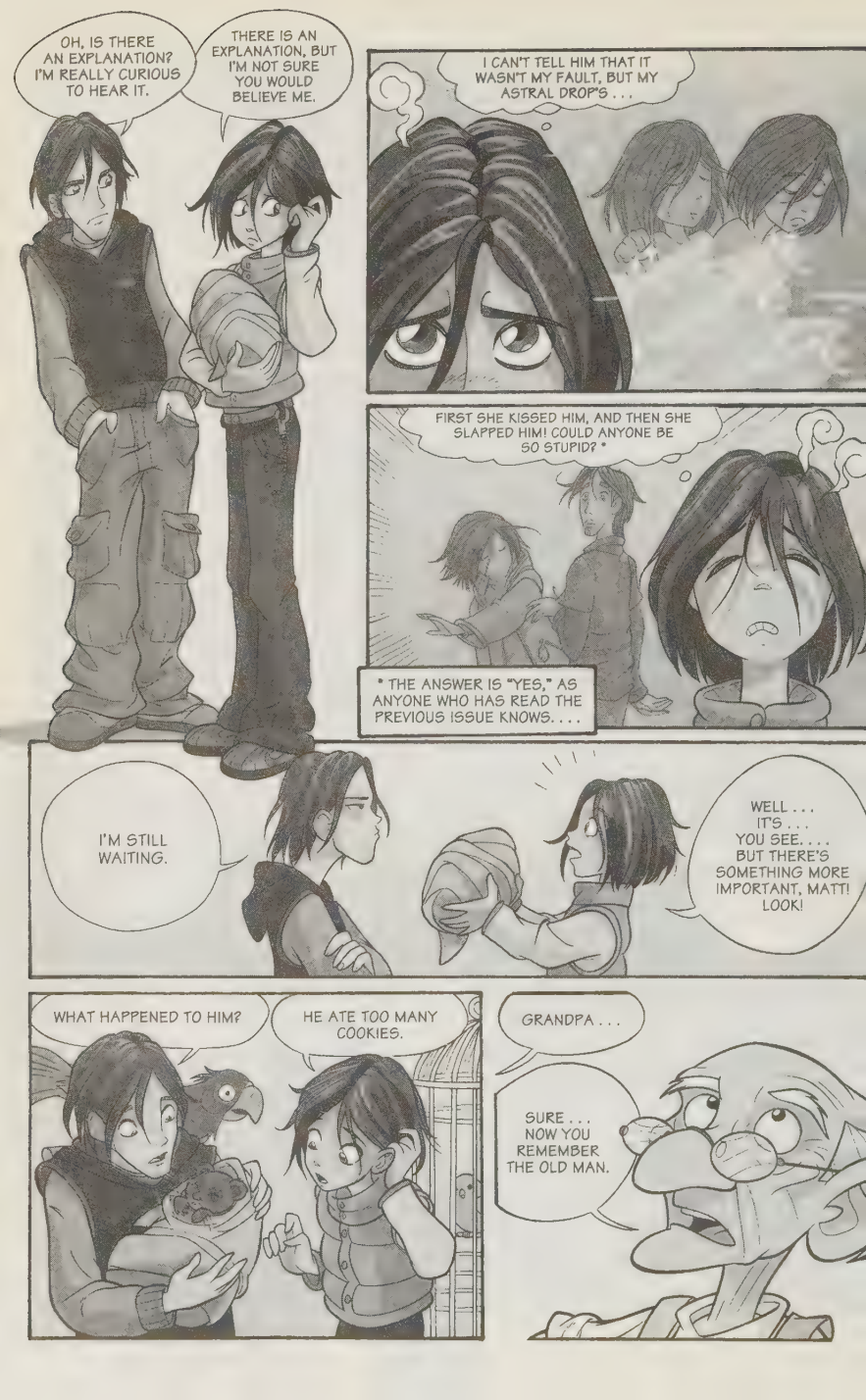
Adapted by ELIZABETH LENHARD

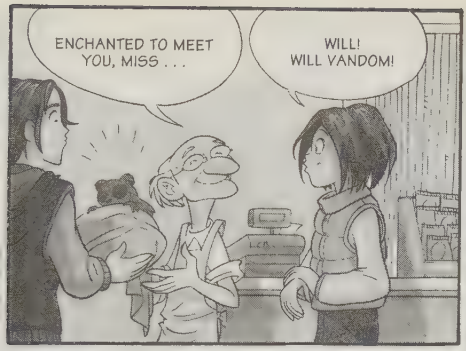
HarperCollins *Children's Books*


IT MOVES IN THE DARK.
MASTER OF THE DARKNESS, IT RUNS IN THE SHADOWS QUICKLY AND QUIETLY.
IT BREATHES SHARPLY. IT TURNS. IT JUMPS. IT ESCAPES.
ITS HEART BEATS WILDLY. IT HEARS STEPS GETTING CLOSER. IT KNOWS IT IS IN A TRAP. . . .
. . . AND WHAT IS WORSE IS THAT SHE KNOWS IT, TOO.
COME ON, GET OUT FROM THERE! YOU'RE IN BIG TROUBLE THIS TIME!
GNIK!


UNTIL THIS MORNING, MY COOKIES WERE IN HERE. I THOUGHT WE HAD CLARIFIED THE CONCEPT OF PRIVATE PROPERTY!
EEERK?
YOU ARE NOT A DORMOUSE. YOU ARE A THIEF. THERE'S ONLY ONE MORE LEFT. I'LL GIVE IT TO YOU AS A PRESENT!
URP!
EEERK! EEERK! EEERK!
HUH? NOW WHAT'S WRONG? ARE YOU OKAY?
OH, NO! DON'T DO THIS TO ME, DORMOUSE! OPEN YOUR EYES! SMILE! WHAT'S UP WITH YOU?
MMM . . . OUK!
IT'S SICK! NOW, WHAT DO I DO? MY MUM IS STILL AT THE OFFICE! WHO CAN I ASK FOR HELP?
. . . OF COURSE! MATT! WHERE DID I PUT HIS PHONE NUMBER?

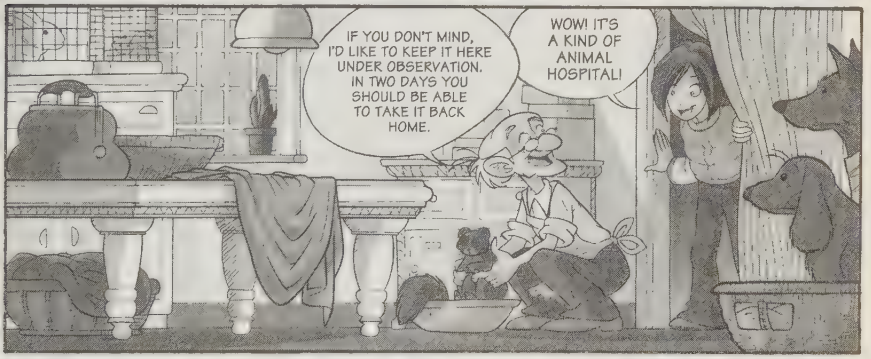

HELLO? HI, I WAS LOOKING FOR MATT. . . . I AM A FRIEND. AH . . . AND WHERE MAY I FIND HIM? IT'S KIND OF URGENT.
I'LL WRITE IT DOWN. ALMOND STREET. . .
AT NUMBER 12 ALMOND STREET
MATT'S GRANDFATHER'S PET SHOP!
M–MAY. . . MAY I COME IN?
COME IN, MISS. WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?
AH, IT'S YOU!
UM . . . HELLO, MATT.
OH! DO YOU TWO KNOW EACH OTHER?
HAVE YOU COME TO SLAP ME AGAIN, OR IS THIS A COURTESY VISIT?
I . . . I CAN EXPLAIN EVERY-THING.
HMPH! GO ON AND TALK AS IF I WERE NOT HERE!


OH, IS THERE AN EXPLANATION? I'M REALLY CURIOUS TO HEAR IT.
THERE IS AN EXPLANATION, BUT I'M NOT SURE YOU WOULD BELIEVE ME.
I CAN'T TELL HIM THAT IT WASN'T MY FAULT, BUT MY ASTRAL DROP'S . . .
FIRST SHE KISSED HIM, AND THEN SHE SLAPPED HIM! COULD ANYONE BE SO STUPID? *
* THE ANSWER IS "YES," AS ANYONE WHO HAS READ THE PREVIOUS ISSUE KNOWS. . . .
I'M STILL WAITING.
WELL . . . IT'S . . . YOU SEE. . . . BUT THERE'S SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT, MATT! LOOK!
WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?
HE ATE TOO MANY COOKIES.
GRANDPA . . .
SURE . . . NOW YOU REMEMBER THE OLD MAN.

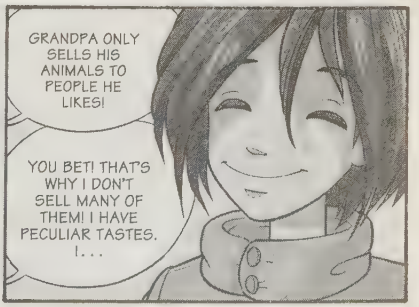

ENCHANTED TO MEET YOU, MISS . . .
WILL! WILL VANDOM!

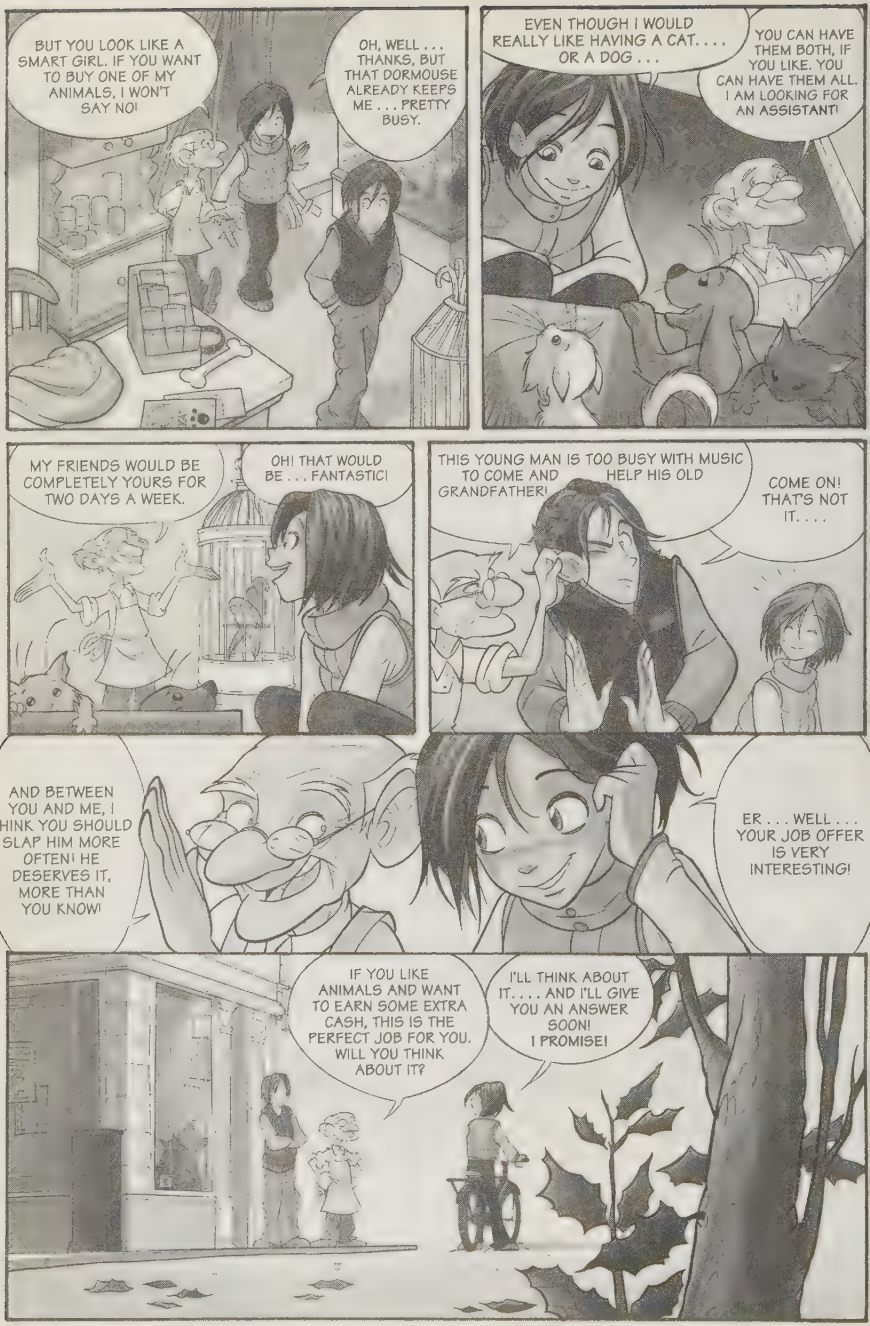
AND THIS IS YOUR DORMOUSE. THEY AREN'T REALLY PETS. . . .
WILL ALREADY SAVED HIM ONCE – AT THE PARK, A WHILE AGO.

WELL DONE, YOUNG LADY. AND SOMETHING TELLS ME THAT THIS LITTLE BEAST WILL BE OKAY. YOU MUST BE ITS GUARDIAN ANGEL!


IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'D LIKE TO KEEP IT HERE UNDER OBSERVATION. IN TWO DAYS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE IT BACK HOME.
WOW! IT'S A KIND OF ANIMAL HOSPITAL!

MY GRANDFATHER HAS BEEN WORKING AS A VETERINARY SURGEON FOR ABOUT FIFTY YEARS.
AND I JUST CANNOT STOP, TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH . . .

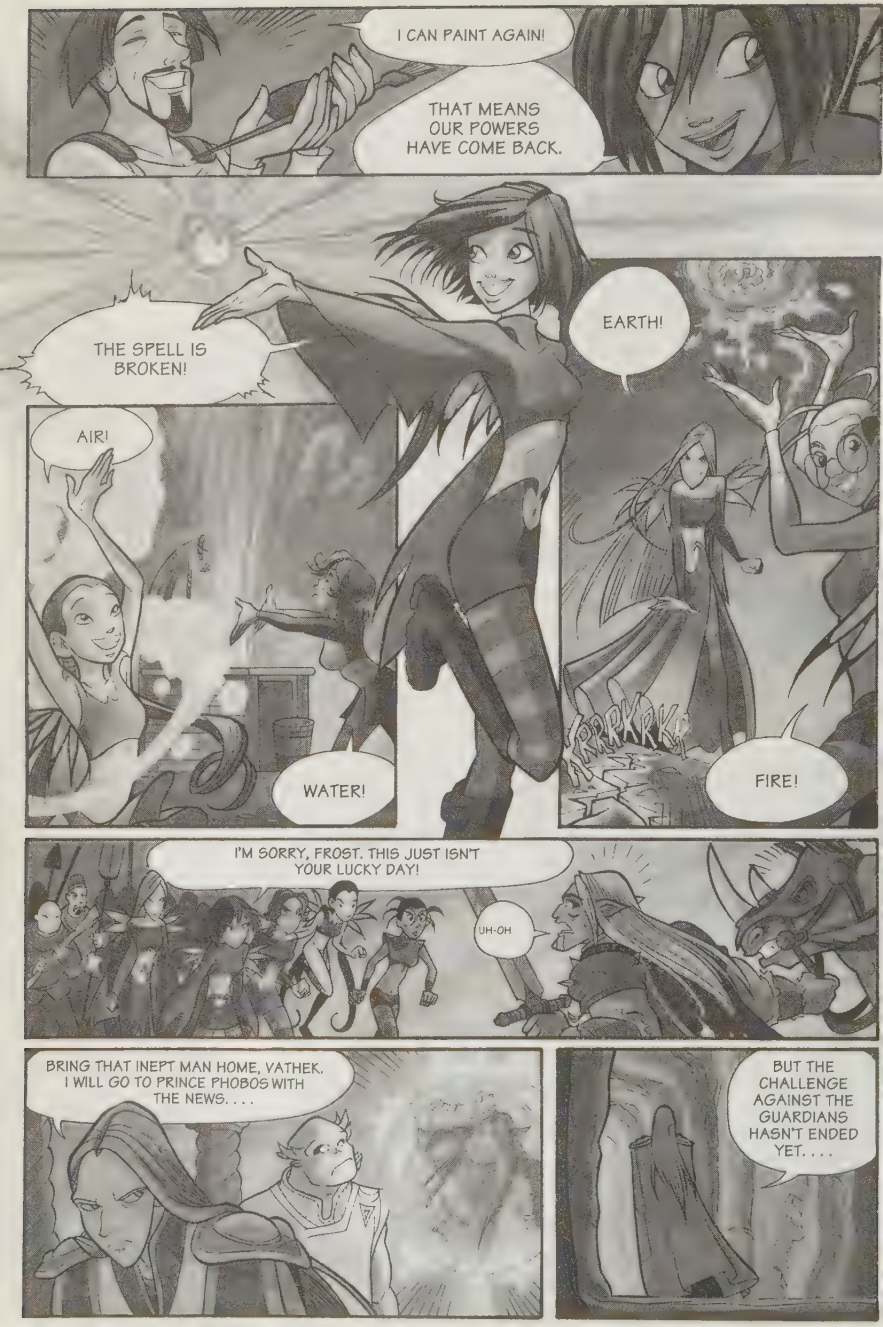

GRANDPA ONLY SELLS HIS ANIMALS TO PEOPLE HE LIKES!
YOU BET! THAT'S WHY I DON'T SELL MANY OF THEM! I HAVE PECULIAR TASTES. I . . .


BUT YOU LOOK LIKE A SMART GIRL. IF YOU WANT TO BUY ONE OF MY ANIMALS, I WON'T SAY NO!
OH, WELL . . . THANKS, BUT THAT DORMOUSE ALREADY KEEPS ME . . . PRETTY BUSY.
EVEN THOUGH I WOULD REALLY LIKE HAVING A CAT. . . . OR A DOG . . .
YOU CAN HAVE THEM BOTH, IF YOU LIKE. YOU CAN HAVE THEM ALL. I AM LOOKING FOR AN ASSISTANT!
MY FRIENDS WOULD BE COMPLETELY YOURS FOR TWO DAYS A WEEK.
OH! THAT WOULD BE . . . FANTASTIC!
THIS YOUNG MAN IS TOO BUSY WITH MUSIC TO COME AND HELP HIS OLD GRANDFATHER!
COME ON! THAT'S NOT IT. . . .
AND BETWEEN YOU AND ME, I THINK YOU SHOULD SLAP HIM MORE OFTEN! HE DESERVES IT, MORE THAN YOU KNOW!
ER . . . WELL . . . YOUR JOB OFFER IS VERY INTERESTING!
IF YOU LIKE ANIMALS AND WANT TO EARN SOME EXTRA CASH, THIS IS THE PERFECT JOB FOR YOU. WILL YOU THINK ABOUT IT?
I'LL THINK ABOUT IT. . . . AND I'LL GIVE YOU AN ANSWER SOON! I PROMISE!

AND THIS MUST BE THE VIAL WITH THE LAST TEAR. TAKE IT, ELIAS. . . .
. . . TAKE IT AND USE IT FOR YOUR COLOURS!
DON'T LISTEN TO HER, ELIAS. . . .
. . . I WOULDN'T DO THAT IF I WERE YOU!
IT'S FROST THE HUNTER!
FWAAAM
B–BUT. . .
THIS PROVES THAT I WAS RIGHT, ELIAS! WE CAN MANAGE TO BREAK THAT SPELL! GO!
DO WHAT I TOLD YOU! RUN HOME TO MIX YOUR COLOURS!
GO, NOW! WE'LL TAKE CARE OF HIM!
NICE, IRMA! JUST HOW DO YOU THINK WE'LL BE ABLE TO TAKE THAT BEAST DOWN?
THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, CORNELIA! YOU DON'T HAVE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE!
I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE PAINTER LATER! BUT I'LL FINISH YOU OFF FIRST! YOU'VE ALREADY ESCAPED FROM ME ONCE. . . .
WE DON'T WANT TO CONTRADICT YOU, BUT WE'RE GOING TO ESCAPE THIS TIME, TOO. . . .

KKRAAM
NO!
OUT, QUICKLY! MAKE HIM FOLLOW US!
FASTER, CRIMSON! LET'S TAKE THEM!
TA-DA
OOM
TA-DADOOM
LET HIM FOLLOW US? HE'S ON A HORSE! HE'LL GET US IN A MINUTE!
MAYBE NOT, CORNELIA . . .
. . . FROST IS TOO BUSY FRIGHTENING US TO REMEMBER TO LOWER HIS HEAD.
KRAK
UHHHN . . .
UH-OH . . YOU WEREN'T EXAGGERATING!
HE TOOK HIMSELF OUT!
GRRR . . . THIS JOKE WILL COST YOU. . . .
SPLAT
!

IRMA!
BUT IT WASN'T ME!
IT WAS US, KNIGHT! AREN'T YOU A LITTLE TOO BIG TO BE ANNOYED WITH FIVE GIRLS?
!
WE DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE IN OUR VILLAGE! WHY DON'T YOU GO AWAY?
DON'T GO AGAINST ME! YOU STILL DON'T KNOW ME. . . .
DIDN'T YOU HEAR WHAT MY SOLDIER ASKED YOU TO DO?!
HE ASKED YOU NICELY. . . . BUT IF YOU PREFER TO HEAR IT SAID WITH FORCE, YOU HAVE ONLY TO SAY THE WORD!
IT WORKS! IT WORKS!
HUH?
IT WORKS, GIRLS! THE TEAR HAS BROUGHT BACK THE COLOUR. . . .


I CAN PAINT AGAIN!
THAT MEANS OUR POWERS HAVE COME BACK.
THE SPELL IS BROKEN!
AIR!
WATER!
EARTH!
FIRE!
KRRAKK
I'M SORRY, FROST. THIS JUST ISN'T YOUR LUCKY DAY!
UH-OH
BRING THAT INEPT MAN HOME, VATHEK. I WILL GO TO PRINCE PHOBOS WITH THE NEWS. . . .
BUT THE CHALLENGE AGAINST THE GUARDIANS HASN'T ENDED YET. . . .

DO YOU HEAR THE WIND BLOWING?
I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS. . . .
WHOOSH
IT HAS NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE TODAY!
NOWHERE IS IT WRITTEN THAT THINGS MUST ALWAYS GO ON THE SAME WAY. . . .
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO NOW?
WE'LL GO BACK TO OUR WORLD. . . . BUT WE WON'T CLOSE THE PORTAL IN THIS PAINTING!
WHY NOT? ISN'T THAT YOUR MISSION?
YES . . . BUT THAT OPENING IS YOUR ONLY CHANCE OF GOING HOME.
THIS IS MY HOME NOW! NOBODY IS WAITING FOR ME ANYMORE. . . . NOT IN MERIDIAN, OR ANYWHERE ELSE!

WHEN YOU GO, THIS WILL BECOME A PAINTING AGAIN.
WE . . .
DO YOUR DUTY, GUARDIANS OF CANDRACAR!
B–BUT. . .
I'M ASKING YOU THIS AS A FAVOUR.
WELL, THEN, SO BE IT.
GOOD-BYE, ELIAS.
FAREWELL, GIRLS!
CANDRACAR . . .
. . . TAKE US HOME. . . .

EPILOGUE:
THE MUSEUM OF HEATHERFIELD, A FEW DAYS LATER
. . . AND WHEN YOU FINISH WAXING THE CORRIDOR, THE STEGOSAURUS IS WAITING IN THE WEST WING.
BUT, MISTER DIRECTOR . . . WE ALREADY DUSTED IT YESTERDAY.
HAVEN'T YOU HEARD OF "THE DUST OF THE CENTURIES"? THAT BEAST IS MILLIONS OF YEARS OLD. . . .
DIVIDE THAT BY A CENTURY AND YOU GET. . . HMMM . . .
HEY, HOW MANY MILLIONS OF YEARS DOES IT TAKE IF YOU DIVIDE IT BY A CENTURY?
THREE MONTHS, KURT! WHICH WE'LL BE SPENDING HERE!
DON'T COMPLAIN, URIAH. THE JUDGE WAS COOL. WE GOT OFF LIGHT.
CERTAINLY! WE'LL HAVE A LOT OF FUN DURING THE NEXT NINETY DAYS. . . .
I'M SO MAD AT SOCIAL SERVICES. . . . AND JUDGE COOK, TOO!
HEY! ISN'T THAT HER DAUGHTER?

SO WHAT? SHE DIDN'T HAVE ANYHING TO DO WITH WHAT HAPPENED.
DON'T GET ALL DEFENSIVE!
HELLO . . .
HELLO!
CULTURAL VISIT, BEAUTIES?
NO, URIAH . . .
. . . WE'VE COME TO VISIT A FRIEND.

ONE

Irma Lair gaped at her mother.

As usual, Mrs. Lair had her fists planted on her hips, and she was glaring at her daughter.

Also as usual, Irma was responding with a glare of her own. Irma didn't have to look at a mirror to know which expression she was wearing. It was her tried-and-true Mask of Horror, with added touches of incredulity and scorn. It was tailor-made for Mum.

It was also the only expression Irma could muster at that particularly terrible moment.

My mother, Irma thought desperately, has just ordered me to do the unthinkable. She is making me leave my cosy, quiet bedroom. . . .

Here, Irma paused and looked around her bedroom. Okay, so it wasn't *exactly* quiet, what with the stereo blaring and her pet turtle, Leafy,

loudly gnawing on a carrot in his bowl. And cosy? Well, if you call a heap of somewhat fragrant laundry on the floor and a vanity table piled high with unfinished homework cosy, then cosy was exactly what Irma's room was.

The point, Irma thought with a shrug, is that my mother is *throwing* me out of the sanctuary of our home. She's making me go . . . on a date!

Irma realised immediately that this sounded odd. After all, she was a normal teenage girl. She went to school. She loved shopping, bodysurfing at the beach, talking to her girlfriends on the phone, *and* dating. I like dating boys – cute, sporty, *stylish* ones, Irma thought. This date is with a total nerd! He is, in fact, the most unbearable dweeb at the Sheffield Institute – the skinny, bespectacled Martin Tubbs!

"Irma," Mum scolded. She stepped through Irma's bedroom door threateningly. "You promised!"

"Promised?" Irma squeaked. "When would I have promised anything like that?"

"Irma!" Mum repeated. Her blue eyes narrowed to slits and her forehead scrunched into a field of angry furrows. "If you don't leave

this bedroom immediately, I will get very, very angry."

Irma looked around her bedroom desperately. Her eyes fell on the stack of schoolbooks lying on top of her vanity table. Homework! Homework trumped everything! Irma dived toward the desk and scooped up a couple of textbooks.

"I want to do my homework!" she wailed. "I have to study. Send Leafy instead of me!" Irma pointed to her pet turtle.

"Your turtle is not going on a date with Martin Tubbs!" Mum sputtered. "*You* are! Now come on! You're acting like a little girl!"

Mum grabbed Irma by the wrist and began dragging her into the hallway.

This is child abuse! Irma thought. But she knew not to play that card with her mum, who, after all, was *usually* quite the softie. She was always baking cookies and helping Irma and her brother, Christopher, with their homework and stuff like that.

That's it! Irma thought suddenly. I'll appeal to Mum's soft side.

"A mother cannot do this to her favourite daughter," she cried, grabbing on to the door as Mum tried to yank her down the stairs.

"You're my *only* daughter," Mum pointed out, through gritted teeth.

"Don't you have a heart?" Irma wailed. In a tragic gesture, Irma lifted her own hand to her chest. She gazed beseechingly at her Mum and let her lower lip tremble, just a bit.

"Please," Mum said, rolling her eyes.

Hey! Irma thought indignantly. That eye roll is *my* move! No fair!

"Don't make such a stink," Mum continued. "You made the date. And now, you'll keep it."

Mum grabbed Irma by both shoulders and began to march her down the stairs towards the living room. Irma sighed heavily. She was beaten. There was no getting out of it. And the worst part of this grievous miscarriage of justice? Irma really *hadn't* made the date.

It was my stupid astral drop who said yes when Martin asked her out, Irma thought with a groan.

Ah, the good old astral drop, she mused grumpily. She's been the *most* inconvenient part of being a Guardian of the Veil. Well, that and being attacked by slimy, scaly monsters every time I turn around.

Lately, Irma's normal, teenage life had

been . . . not so normal after all.

Things had first started getting weird while Irma was soaking in a long, hot bath one day. She'd been lazily trailing her fingers through the steamy bathwater as she daydreamed about her fave TV show, *Boy Comet*. Then, suddenly, Irma had noticed something bizarre! In her fingers' wake, the bathwater had begun to do more than simply ripple and move. It had started floating! Big blobs of water had risen from the water and danced before Irma's incredulous eyes.

Then, with a flick of her finger, Irma had sent the water soaring around the bathroom like a fleet of flying saucers!

Over the next few days, Irma had discovered that she could coax ocean waves to crash where she wanted; convince great geysers to rise out of the earth; even redirect rain!

And that wasn't all. Irma had also found she could predict pop-quiz questions, simply by making a wish.

Meanwhile, her best friends at school – Cornelia, Hay Lin, Taranee, and Will – had all started experiencing supernatural and bizarre moments of their own.

Before any of them had had a chance to

really freak out about their strange new powers, Hay Lin's mysterious grandmother had filled them in on their new situation: beings in a heavenly place called Candracar had anointed the five girls to, well, save the world.

Yeah, Irma thought drily, *then* it was time to freak out. First of all, we learned that we all had magical powers and that Will held the key to those powers. She's the keeper of the Heart of Candracar, this glowy, crystal orb that pops out of her palm every now and again. Every time she unleashes that glowing orb, we all turn into superbeings! We get to wear really cool outfits. Oh, yeah, we can also control all the elements. I'll manipulate anything wet and watery. Hay Lin is all about air. Taranee lassos fire. And Cornelia can control the earth. *That* one makes perfect sense, since Cornelia's such a stick-in-the-mud.

Irma giggled at her joke, even if it had only been in her head. Sure, she loved Cornelia – she'd known her a long time. But even when they were younger, Cornelia had been a little uptight.

A *little* uptight? Irma thought with a roll of the eyes. Who am I kidding? She's a total control freak! Of all us Guardians, *she's* been

the most resistant to this whole we're-magic-and-we-have-to-save-the-world thing.

Of course, Irma thought ruefully as she plodded down the stairs, we were *all* a little resistant to our next discovery. And that was? Basically, that we – we earthlings – are definitely not alone. In fact, there are a whole bunch of other worlds floating around out there. One of those worlds is Metamoor.

Irma shuddered at the very thought of Metamoor – a dusky, Gothic-looking place inhabited by talking lizards, leering, blue thugs, and a ruthless hunter named Frost. Metamoor was a dark land of exile – a place that had been taken over by evil.

That was why the all-knowing Oracle of Candracar had created the Veil. The Veil was a barrier that separated Metamoor and earth. For centuries, the Veil had stood stalwart, and no one ever crossed the supernatural fence.

But when the most recent millennium had hit, the Veil had become weak and porous. In twelve spots, the Veil had been punctured completely, creating portals between earth and Metamoor. All of those gateways just happened to be located in Heatherfield, otherwise known as Irma's very own hometown. Put

simply – it was the young Guardians' job to find the portals and seal them.

Simple, but not easy!

Hay Lin's grandmother had given the girls a guide to the portals. But the magical map only revealed each opening's location *after* it had been found.

What's more, the Guardians usually found a portal just as some evil monster came through it, itching for a fight! The girls had already battled a few Metamoorian goons, and barely escaped with their lives.

Almost as soon as the Guardians had been handed their mission, their friend, Elyon Brown, had traveled through a portal, never to return. She'd totally defected to Metamoor. She'd also turned cold and evil. Now she was trying to coerce the Guardians into joining her.

Talk about a catfight, Irma thought, as she landed at the bottom of the stairs.

Elyon had tried all sorts of dirty tricks to sway her friends. She'd teased and tormented them. Then she'd almost killed them, with the help of some predatory, writhing, brick walls. Finally, she'd kidnapped Taranee and tricked her into believing her friends had forgotten her.

Elyon's mistake had been in underestimating the Guardians. They'd rushed to Metamoor to rescue Taranee. The mission was dangerous, and the Guardians had had no idea how long they'd be gone. So, right before they'd left, they'd used their magic to create astral drops: magical doubles who stood in for the girls at school and home. The scheme had pretty much worked! Not one of the girls' parents had detected their absence. Irma's double had even taken a science test for her!

But then again, her astral drop had also agreed to go on a date with Martin Tubbs!

My astral drop was supposed to absorb everything bouncing around in my brain, Irma thought in despair. And mostly, she got it right. When I came back to earth and absorbed her experiences, I found that she'd talked back in gym class when the coach tried to make her serve the volleyball. *So* me! I hate serving! She also shunned Mum's gross turkey meat loaf and took a two-hour bath. So she *must* have known how much I loathed Martin. I've loathed him since we were practically toddlers. Nobody with any common sense would ever agree to a date with . . .

Martin! As Irma stalked into the living

room, she spotted him, sitting in the overstuffed chair. Christopher, her annoying little brother, was sitting nearby, playing a video game on TV. When Irma walked into the room, Christopher gave her a teasing sneer.

"Don't you say a word," Irma muttered.

Irma sized Martin up immediately, from his flushed face and Coke-bottle glasses to his horrendous outfit! He was wearing his goofy, blue Explorer Scout uniform – shorts, dark socks, and neckerchief! Awkwardly, Martin scuttled out of his chair and waved at Irma. He gave her a googly-eyed grin.

"Say hello to your friend, Irma," Mum said, with a stern look.

"My little doughnut!" Martin cried, rushing across the room to Irma. "You look simply ravishing."

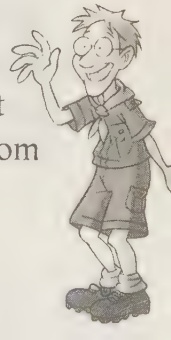
Irma closed her eyes, swallowed hard, and counted backward from ten. It was going to be a *long* afternoon!

TWO

Martin could not believe his luck! He, yes, he – Martin Tubbs, who only yesterday had been humiliatingly given a wedgie by one of Sheffield Institute's many bullies – was about to go on a date with Irma Lair. *The* Irma Lair.

As he hurried across the room toward his beloved, Martin skimmed over his hair with one hand. He'd experimented with some styling mousse that morning, spending about half an hour arranging the straw-coloured strands to match a picture he'd found in an old copy of *Lion Beat* magazine.

Yes, yes, very fashionable, Martin thought as his fingers brushed over the crusty helmet of hair. Irma will love it! At least, that's what I figured out last night from



the book I just bought, *Dating for Smarties*.

In his head, Martin quoted from Chapter 7: *Do not, under any circumstances, show up for your date in your same old brown, corduroy pants and* Star Journey *convention T-shirt. Show your lady that you have put some effort into your appearance. Buy yourself some new threads, and make sure you shave.*

Martin didn't have to worry about shaving yet. But he *had* given his outfit hours of thought. And he thought his selection was *pret*-ty dazzling, if he did say so himsel–

"What's *up* with the outfit, Martin?" Irma cried, piercing Martin's self-appraisal with her usual, er, wit. "Are you auditioning for the circus? Or did your closet explode, leaving you with *nothing* to wear except your . . . Explorer Scouts uniform?"

Irma's big eyes – as blue as the *ocean*, Martin thought – focused on Martin's crisp uniform for a moment before quickly shifting away.

"It's my Sunday best!" Martin told Irma, laughing off her insult as he usually did. He *knew* she was just teasing him . . . uh, as she usually did. But just in case, Martin was mindful of Chapter 11 of *Dating for Smarties*: "Don't

be the strong and silent type," the author had admonished. "Girls like a modern man, who can share their emotions. About *her*, that is. No gushing on about the miracle that is your new, 120-megahertz Pentium hard drive, beautiful as it may be!"

Right, Martin thought. Expressing emotions. The *perfect* way to start a first date! Here goes!

"You see, Irma," Martin expressed. "I chose these fancy threads because this is an amazing opportunity. I've been waiting for this moment for years. Going out with you is my life's dream!"

Irma rolled her eyes.

"You know, that's a coincidence," she snapped. "Going out with you is *my* nightmare. So, let's make it snappy, okay? Where do I have to go with you?"

As Irma slipped her arms into a pink hoodie, her mother stepped forward and squeezed her daughter's shoulder – and squeezed it hard, from the looks of her white knuckles.

"Please excuse her, Martin," Mum said over Irma's head. "She must have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. She's usually quite kind."

Martin nodded and smiled politely. As he did, he felt a familiar pain – a pang, actually – smack in the middle of his chest. Why was he sensing this old sting? Because Irma was acting like the old Irma again – the one who had rejected him each of the 736 times he'd asked her out before. The one who had put him into a headlock every morning throughout the third grade and demanded his milk money. The one who . . . didn't want to be caught dead with him in public.

Could it be, Martin thought, that the Irma who agreed to go out with me was some sort of impostor? Like the cyborg doppelgänger who invaded the spaceship in *Star Journey*, episode number forty-seven?

Martin shrugged and smiled.

Nah! he thought. That kind of thing only happens in television shows and stuff! Now, it *is* possible Irma had the flu when she said yes! But no matter. Now that I've got her all to myself, I'll have a chance to impress her. By the end of this date, she'll be *captivated*. She will be my date to the spring prom! And she will beat up any bully who tries to give me a wedgie, from this day forward!

Completely cheered, Martin walked to the

front door. And he willfully pretended not to hear when Irma hissed to her mother, "How can I be kind when he's dressed that way?!"

Martin wiped the sweat off his palm to open the door. When he stepped outside, Irma actually followed him! This date was going great! His seductive skills had even gotten the attention of Irma's little brother, Christopher, who had abandoned his video game to watch the teenagers leave. Having an audience had given Martin an extra bolt of confidence.

"All the girls talk like this at first," he told Irma as they headed down the walk. "But you're underestimating me, my little sweet potato. Behind this face lurks a sensitive creature."

Irma gaped at Martin. Then she looked away.

Martin hoped mentioning his face hadn't called attention to the big zit on his nose.

Irma did not even look at him again. She stomped toward the street, but not before Christopher had called out a squeaky-voiced goodbye: "Have fun, my little sweet potato!"

"Grrrrr," Irma snarled. Sending Martin a loathing-filled look, she turned right and began hightailing it down the street.

"You read my mind," Martin panted as he hurried after her. "I'm taking you out to the Heatherfield Museum. I already have tickets. We Explorer Scouts get special discounts!"

Martin waited for Irma's reaction. Would she like his idea? Girls like Irma often preferred the mall, but Martin was *much* more knowledgeable about dinosaur bones and medieval manuscripts than he was about frozen yogurt flavours and the latest in denim washes. He wanted to impress Irma with his smarts!

When Irma nodded in brusque agreement and continued walking in the direction of the museum, Martin felt a thrill.

Score! he thought. One point for Martin Tubbs.

Martin glanced at his watch. Uh-oh. It had been about four minutes and twenty-five seconds since he'd expressed any emotion. Better get on the ball if he was going to make Irma fall in love with him by curfew!

"Irma?" he said. He winced as his voice cracked, but pressed on. "I don't want to get too mushy, but I really believe we're made for each other. Sure, you look at me now, in this official-looking uniform, and you think I'm a real straight arrow. But that isn't the real me."

"Oh, I know it," Irma said. She turned a corner and headed for a flight of stone steps. The museum was just a few blocks away. "The real you is a lot worse."

"Irma!" Martin giggled. "What I mean is, there's untapped strength in me. I look like this now. But I could change in an instant if I just, say, took off my glasses."

Martin swiped his glasses off his nose and squinted at her. Irma's beautiful, if surly face, suddenly went fuzzy. Martin could barely see his beloved! But it was worth the sacrifice. He needed Irma to see the real him – the dashing man behind the glasses. If only she would stop walking and look at him! No matter – Martin could talk and walk – well, stumble – at the same time.

"See, look at me now," he said, puffing out his chest. "Don't I look like – *aaaaigggghh*!"

Ba-dump, ba-damp, thud, thud, skiiddddddd.

Oooooooh, Martin groaned a moment later. Wha– what happened?

Turning his head painfully to one side, he found himself nose-to-cement with the bottom step of a flight of stairs. The last time he had been able to see, Martin had been at the *top* of those stairs.

Martin groaned again and closed his eyes. *Owwwww!* He was bruised and battered. Nothing could possibly cure his painnnn–

"Martin!"

Martin's eyes popped open! Never mind! The concern in Irma's shrill voice made him completely forget his almost-broken bones.

Now, Irma's hazy face appeared above him. Sighing, she reached down and placed his glasses on his face. As she came into focus, Martin saw her bite her lip. Her forehead was furrowed with concern and – wait a minute – Martin had never seen that look on Irma's face before. Was it guilt?

From his position flat on his back, Martin winked at his date.

"So," he said to her. "Who do I look like without my glasses?"

Irma heaved a deep sigh.

"A goof," she said softly. "You look like a nearsighted goof, Martin." But the surly edge had left her voice.

Here's the part where she declares her love for me! Martin thought hopefully.

But alas, before Irma could form the words, an elderly lady appeared at the kids' side, offering to call an ambulance. Martin waved

her off gallantly.

"Don't you worry, ma'am," he said, jumping to his feet and brushing off his skinned knees. "Everything's under control!"

Noting, with another inward, thrill Irma's raised eyebrows, Martin resumed his walk toward the museum. Irma fell into step beside him. And this time, she didn't dart ahead, or stomp. She simply walked.

Soon, the pair were climbing the museum's grand, marble staircase.

"Here we are," Martin announced happily. "The Heatherfield Museum. One day, we'll be laughing together, and we'll say, 'Remember that afternoon, after school, when we went to the Heatherfield Museum?' I can just see it."

"Martin," Irma said. She bit her lip again, took a deep breath, and plunged ahead. This looked serious!

"Martin," she said again quietly. "You're a good friend – a pain in the neck – but a friend. *Only* a friend. Do you understand? That I'm here with you today, but only in friendship? You have to open your eyes to that."

"I do?" Martin asked.

"It would be better for everybody," Irma said, placing one hand gently on Martin's

shoulder. "Believe me."

"O– okay," Martin said.

The warmth and weight of Irma's hand on his shoulder had an unexpected effect on Martin. He'd always thought that Irma's touch would send zings of happiness thrumming through his heart. But instead, he found himself feeling . . . a sense of peace!

He supposed he'd always known that such a conversation would happen. He'd just never expected Irma to be so wistful about it. Or so nice! Maybe this *would* be the start of a beautiful friendship. And shockingly, Martin thought, maybe that would be enough for him.

Feeling a new lightness – and less nervousness – in his footsteps, Martin took a deep breath and smiled.

"I *have* been a fool," he admitted. "I guess you want to head home now?"

"Not at all," Irma said with a smile. "You've dragged me to the museum. Let's go see it"

"Aha!" Martin cried. "See? Deep down, your heart belongs to me. I know it."

"Martin . . ." Irma said. But she laughed lightly as they walked into the museum. For once, they both got the joke. Martin happily

steered Irma away from the museum's art gallery and into the natural history department.

"Let's go here, my little pancake," he said. "We can start with the dinosaurs. Because that's where humanity started, after all. We're all descended from these big, scaly creatures."

"Gee, the first date and you're already introducing me to the family?" Irma quipped drily. "I guess you *are* serious."

Martin pointed up at a giant brontosaurus skeleton. The big, craggy skull seemed to be peering right at them.

"Raise your voice a bit," Martin said, glancing away from Irma's smiling face to gaze at the skeleton. "You know, Grandma's kind of deaf."

Eeeeeeeeeekkkkk!

"Aaiighhh!" Martin cried, clapping his hands over his ears and turning back to Irma in shock. He liked Irma's drama queen ways, but this was out of control. "I'd say that's raising your voice a little too much, Irma."

"That wasn't me!" she exclaimed.

But the scream had definitely come from another girl nearby! The sound was so terrifying, Martin's first impulse was to flee. He

assumed Irma would be right there next to him.

This afternoon was full of surprises. When Martin looked at Irma, she didn't look freaked at all. In fact, she looked curious – eager, even, to find the source of that scream. Before Martin knew it, Irma had begun dashing out of the dinosaur exhibit – and towards the woman's scream. With a bewildered shrug, Martin set out after her.

They reached the gallery exit just in time to see a woman in a blue suit dashing into the museum's foyer. Still screaming, she headed straight for the protective arms of a security guard.

"Miss Stevens!" the guard exclaimed in a panic. "What's wrong?"

Wait a minute, Martin thought in alarm. That woman is in uniform. *She*'s a security guard, too! If a *guard* is this freaked out, something must be really wrong.

"Over there," Miss Stevens stammered, pointing down a gloomy hallway towards a small art gallery. "Over th– there. It's horrible!"

As Miss Stevens continued to cling to the man, he unhooked a walkie-talkie from his belt.

"Command?" he blurted out. "Emergency on the east side!"

Irma grabbed Martin's jacket sleeve.

"Let's go see!" she whispered. Martin gaped at her in disbelief.

"Are you serious?" he squeaked.

When Irma nodded, Martin shrugged his skinny shoulders and agreed.

"Wow," he muttered. "I knew a date with Irma Lair would be unforgettable, but I had no idea it would turn into some kind of action-adventure movie! I just want to know one thing – when do I get to yell, 'Cut'?"

THREE

As Irma led Martin into the gallery, she could only imagine his confusion. First she'd gone all nice on him – a phenomenon that Irma *herself* was still trying to wrap her brain around. And now, she was doing this hero thing. She knew it must have seemed majorly out of character.

Only a short time ago, it *would* have been, Irma thought. But now that I'm a Guardian, it feels as if Superhero is my middle name.

Irma snuck down the dusky hallway with Martin in tow. When they arrived in the small, shadowy gallery, she shuddered. It was eerily quiet. Figures from the looming oil paintings on the walls seemed to leer out at the kids.

Martin crowded behind Irma and whispered, "I don't see anything."

Kssssssshhhhhhh!

Irma gulped. Slowly she glanced up at a corner of the gallery. Sure enough, she spotted a ghastly creature – a giant, yellow-eyed, hissing lizard, dressed in a brown, suede tunic!

I'd recognise that Metamoorian fashion faux pas anywhere, Irma thought. One of the bad guys has come to pay another call on earth. Just dandy!

"Uh, Martin," Irma said quietly. "If you look harder, you *will* see something."

Martin looked harder.

Then he jumped about a foot in the air.

And *then* he cried, "Holy smokes! Let's get out of here!"

Martin darted out of the gallery, shrieking all the way.

Irma stood her ground. She'd battled creatures a lot meaner and scarier than this ol' reptile. She wasn't terribly worried. But she *did* want to know what the reptile was doing hanging around the Heatherfield Museum.

Apparently, the curiosity was mutual. The slimy visitor skittered down the gallery wall and crept toward Irma on all fours. Then it rose up on its hind legs and flicked its forked tongue in her direction. Irma's lip curled as she took a

deep breath, but she didn't back down.

Let it try something, she thought bravely. In two seconds flat, I could whip up a super-sized water balloon with that lizard's name on it!

Sniiffff, sssssssniiifff.

The lizard cocked its slick head at Irma – and spoke!

"You are . . ." it hissed.

Suddenly, the lizard's yellow eyes bulged in surprise. "A Guardian! *Hiisssssssss!* A *Guardian*!"

Before Irma could reply, the frightened creature whipped around. In fact, it turned so fast it almost tripped Irma with its ten-foot-long tail. It scrambled back up the wall, ducking into the gloom of the gallery's darkest corner.

"Wait!" Irma cried desperately. "Don't go away! Hold on!"

But the lizard didn't look back. In an instant it completely disappeared into the shadows of the gallery.

Where'd it go? Irma thought in bewilderment. It's like it just melted into nothing. She stared up at the now-empty corner for a moment.

Anxiety began to gnaw at her gut. It was becoming painfully clear that the Guardians' work would never be done. Every time Irma began to relax – to get back into the routine of her old life of school, mall trips, and gossip sessions with her friends – some new crisis seemed to rear its ugly head.

Or its ugly, giant lizard's head!

Irma was just starting to freak out when she was startled by the sound of feet pounding behind her. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw Martin and two burly, armed guards hurrying into the gallery.

"Everything okay, miss?" one guard asked.

"Huh?" Irma said vaguely. She glanced back up at the shady corner. The lizard had definitely disappeared. "Oh, uh, sure, officer."

Miss Stevens, the guard who had been so terrified, crept into the gallery.

"But, there was a creature here," she insisted. "It jumped out of thin air!"

"I saw it, too," Martin whispered. "Did you? It was some kind of giant reptile! Maybe one of the dinosaur eggs finally hatched!"

Oh, my friend, Irma thought wearily. If only it were that simple!

FOUR

Hay Lin tried to take a deep breath. It was a struggle. The air this morning felt so heavy. It was oppressive . . . practically unbreathable!

And the reasons for that are what? Hay Lin wondered drily. Well, the simplest answer would be that it's pouring.

She gazed out of the covered walkway where she was hanging with her friends. Just beyond their narrow shelter – one of many open-air corridors that linked the various buildings of the Sheffield Institute – the schoolyard was positively soaked. The sky was grey and rumbled with thunder. The rain was coming down so hard that small swimming pools were forming on the lawn. Hay Lin even thought for a minute that she saw a bird doing the

backstroke in one of them!

But, gee, rainy weather? thought Hay Lin with a frown. That's too easy an explanation. I know the real reason my lungs feel as if they were filled with cotton. It's because these days, I'm painfully aware of – well, the air! After all, I'm Breezy Girl – the Guardian with the power over the wind. Hay Lin couldn't help but laugh as she imagined herself jetting about on frothy gusts of air. The pizzicato giggle seemed to grab hold of her long, black pigtails, making them swoop upward and dance around her ears. Hay Lin grabbed her glossy tresses and smoothed them down. She glanced around to make sure nobody had glimpsed that magic moment. Luckily, all the other Sheffielders were occupied with dodging raindrops or trekking to class.

Somehow, I don't think the other students would get this whole "air goddess" thing, Hay Lin thought. Except for my fellow Guardians, of course.

She cast a grateful glance at her tight little circle of friends – Will, Irma, Cornelia, and Taranee. Without them in on the secret, this Guardian stuff would be no fun!

And let's face it, Hay Lin thought with a

sigh. Even *with* my friends at my side, being a Guardian isn't much fun these days.

That admission reminded Hay Lin of the third, and final, reason the air felt so heavy that morning: Irma had just dished up a big buzz kill. Yesterday, at the Heatherfield Museum, she'd encountered a whole new Metamoorian invader – a big, green lizard.

Hay Lin had always had faith in fairies. After all, she'd been raised on her grandmother's fantastic fables. She'd actually traveled to another dimension, for Pete's sake. But even Hay Lin found it hard to envision a talking lizard, hanging out between the paintings and the sculptures at the Heatherfield Museum. It was just too weird!

"Are you really sure?" she asked Irma.

"Believe me, Hay Lin," Irma said. The teasing glint that usually danced in Irma's wide, blue eyes was completely AWOL. "If this dude wasn't a Metamoorian, then he was doing a brilliant impression of one."

Taranee folded her arms over her chest. The humidity had flattened her beaded braids onto her shoulders. It seemed also to have dampened her mood. She was looking majorly freaked. Of course, that was not unusual for

Taranee. She was the most skittish of all the Guardians.

"The newspapers and TV reporters don't seem to have taken our lizard friend too seriously," she said, with a quiet sigh of relief. "They talk about it as if it were a kind of mass hallucination!"

"Well, we know the truth," Will said with a definitive nod at Irma. "After all, the lizard knew you were a Guardian."

Will glanced around the circle. Hay Lin could almost see the wheels turning behind Will's brown eyes. Will might have been a reluctant leader, but that didn't stop her from considering every move very carefully.

"Listen," she asked the girls. "Do you have any plans for after school?"

"I should hit the books," Irma said, slumping against the breezeway railing. "I've totally fallen behind on my schoolwork in the past few weeks."

"Oh, really?"

That was Cornelia. Her smile contained a mocking glint. "Weren't you the one who could rig any test with your amazing mental powers, Irma?" She finished her thought and smiled smugly.

"Hey," Irma said. "Who asked you anything?"

Here we go again, Hay Lin thought. It's the Cornelia-and-Irma show. Cornelia irritates Irma, and Irma annoys Cornelia, and so on and so forth. Sometimes, all that 'tude annoyed Hay Lin. But this morning, she found it almost comforting!

At least one thing in our crazy lives these days is consistent! she thought.

As if to illustrate Hay Lin's point, Irma turned her back on Cornelia with a dramatic flourish and spoke directly to Will. "So, what are you thinking, Will?"

"It shouldn't take too much time," Will said. "I just think we need to understand why one of those creatures was in the museum. But how do we figure it out?"

Hay Lin's face lit up.

"I know!" she cried. She swung her bulging purple backpack off her shoulders and began rifling through it. She pushed aside a few sparkly Magic Markers, a pair of blue goggles, and the almond cookies she'd grabbed from her parents' Chinese restaurant earlier. Finally, she found what she was looking for – the magical map that came alive every time

the girls discovered a portal. Hay Lin had a feeling that Irma's museum trip might have brought out a new bright spot on the dusty old parchment.

"Let's take a look," she declared, pulling the scroll out of her backpack.

"The map of the portals," Taranee said. She glanced at the busy students milling about. The coast was clear, but she still looked edgy.

"Shouldn't you keep that in a safer place?" she asked Hay Lin.

"There's no safer place than my backpack," Hay Lin replied as she unfurled the map. "It's my lifeline. I've got it with me all the time."

Hay Lin dropped to her knees and flattened the map out on the breezeway's stone floor. Will crouched down next to her and peered at the detailed rendering of Heatherfield. Then she gasped.

"Wow," she said. "Look there!"

"Yup!" Cornelia said excitedly as she, too, bent over to peer at the map. "Looks like we've located another of our twelve portals! At the Heatherfield Museum!"

"And *what* is so interesting, young ladies?"

Hay Lin froze. So did her friends. There

was no mistaking the bold, brassy voice that had just rung out behind them. It was Mrs. Knickerbocker. *Principal* Knickerbocker. Sheffield Institute's very own white-haired dictator. She knew all. She saw all. And she didn't like it when her students tried to keep things from her.

Hay Lin's breath quickened, coming in short, dry gasps as she rerolled the magic map. And she'd thought the air was thick before! She bent over her backpack, struggling to stash away the secret treasure. As she yanked at her bag's zipper, the other Guardians formed a protective wall in front of her.

Irma piped up, "Tell us, Mrs. Knickerbocker. What *is* so interesting?"

"Uh-huh," Hay Lin heard the principal say. "Stalling for time. I admire your effort, Miss Lair, even if it isn't very original. But what I'd *really* like is to see the object of your attention. After all, there should be no secrets between a principal and her students."

"Of course!" Taranee squeaked.

Meanwhile, Hay Lin was frantically muttering to herself under her breath.

"Of all the times for my backpack zipper to

get stuck," she whispered desperately.

"Hay Lin!"

Mrs. Knickerbocker's bellowing jolted Hay Lin to her feet. She thrust the map behind her back and flashed the principal a wide – if tremulous – grin.

"Yes?" she replied in a shaky voice.

"What are you hiding behind your back?" Mrs. Knickerbocker demanded. Her jowly, wrinkly face contorted itself into a grotesque scowl. "And I warn you, an answer like 'Which back?' will not be accepted."

"It's n– n– nothing, ma'am," Hay Lin stuttered. "It's only a drawing!"

Mrs. Knickerbocker glared down at her and said, "And so? Let's have a look at it! I'm curious as to what kind of drawing would hold five girls' interest so intensely!"

A drawing! Hay Lin thought desperately. She squeezed her eyes shut for an instant, focusing every brain cell on the idea. She willed her magic to well up within her.

It was working! Hay Lin felt a familiar tingling in her fingertips; a quickening of her heartbeat; and a floaty feeling that suffused every limb and made the ends of her pigtails swirl around her elbows. She sensed a stream

of silvery magic emanating from her hands, which were still clutching the scroll behind her back.

When the fluttery feeling ceased, Hay Lin took a big gulp and handed the map to Mrs. Knickerbocker.

"Er, um, here it is," she whispered.

She cringed and waited for the principal's reaction.

"But– but– " Mrs. Knickerbocker stammered. Her eyes widened.

Oh, no! Hay Lin thought as she panicked. She glanced guiltily at her friends. We're sunk!

"This is incredible," Mrs. Knickerbocker continued. "It's me! And a perfect likeness. How did you do it?"

The shocked woman flipped the parchment around and showed it to the girls. The map had disappeared! In its place was a quick, slick pencil drawing of Mrs. Knickerbocker! It *was* a perfect likeness, from her cotton candy–like bouffant to her severe suit.

"Yes, Hay Lin," Cornelia breathed, her cheeks flushed. "How *did* you do it?"

"Oh, well," Hay Lin scoffed, casting her eyes downward. "It was nothing."

"I knew drawing was your passion," Mrs. Knickerbocker said. "But this is amazing! It's a small masterpiece. May I have it?"

"No!" screeched every last Guardian. Mrs. Knickerbocker was so startled she dropped the scroll. Hay Lin plucked it from the air and rolled it up quickly. Then she shot the principal a quick grin.

"You see, this is only, well, a draft!" she improvised. "You deserve a much more beautiful picture, Mrs. Knickerbocker!"

A blip of suspicion flashed in the principal's pale eyes. But when Hay Lin grinned at her even harder, she relented and smiled back.

"All right, Hay Lin," she said. "I'll look forward to seeing that next drawing. I'll even put it up in my office."

Having said that, Mrs. Knickerbocker bustled away, and the five girls sagged with relief.

"What a con artist!" Irma exclaimed, looking at Hay Lin. "She deserves a 'more beautiful picture,' huh?"

Hay Lin shook her head and unrolled the "drawing." A sparkle of magic shimmered across Mrs. Knickerbocker's image, melting it away. A second later, the original map of Heatherfield and its Metamoorian portals was restored.

"You should be thanking me," Hay Lin responded, sticking her tongue out at Irma. "If she had discovered our magic map, we would have had a big problem on our hands."

"If she had discovered the map," Cornelia said, glaring at Hay Lin, "it would have been your fault! We have to take better care of our secrets."

Hay Lin rolled the map up again. She felt a stab of guilt in her chest – another thing that made it hard to breathe! Cornelia was always hurling accusations. This time, however, she was right. She'd endangered the Guardians' mission, not to mention her grandmother's final gift to her.

Hay Lin felt hot tears well up in her eyes at the thought of her tiny grandmother's sweet face and long, white hair. She also thought of her grandmother's power. Right before her grandmother had died, she'd told Hay Lin that she, too, had been a Guardian as a young girl. It turned out saving the world ran in the family! And that was nothing to be taken lightly.

"I hear you," Hay Lin said to Cornelia quietly. She tucked the map – carefully – back into her backpack.

"So, are we all right?" Will asked as she

placed a gentle hand on Hay Lin's shoulder. Hay Lin smiled at her wanly.

With my friends at my side – through both mistakes *and* triumphs – I guess I *am* all right, she thought. She nodded at Will.

"Ready for action," she declared.

"Good," Will said. Her eyes grew dark and filled with determination. "Because the Heatherfield Museum closes at six tonight."

FIVE

"The Heatherfield Museum closes at six tonight."

As Uriah said those words, his voice almost cracked. He was *that* excited.

Of course, that was the last thing he wanted his gang to know. Excitement equaled weakness. Excitement was *not* cool.

And Uriah was cool at all costs.

He was the king of the Outfielders at Sheffield Institute. The Outfielders were the kids on the fringe – and the kids most often in trouble.

Uriah leaned against the railing of the Sheffield Institute breezeway. He toyed with the stiff spikes he'd molded into his bright red hair with gel. The rain was making them sag. He watched scornfully as Infielders

hurried to beat the morning bell, which was going to ring in about five minutes.

See, that's the problem with being an Infielder, Uriah thought. You've got to follow the rules.

He watched with disdain as pretty girls swung their hair over their shoulders while they hurried to their lockers. Then he gazed across the rainy courtyard to the soccer field. Buff guys were trotting off the muddy pitch like earnest and obedient sheepdogs.

Completely conventional – all of 'em. Uriah scoffed.

Of course, conventional, Uriah thought, equals popular. And at Sheffield Institute, the popular ones are Infielders. Well, *I'm* proud to be an Outfielder – a loner. I don't need nobody.

The fact that Uriah was virtually never alone, that he was constantly tailed by his motley crew of thugs – well, that didn't really mean much. *Uriah* didn't need those dudes hanging around him. They needed him! They needed his power. His leadership. His smarts.

Especially tonight.

"So," Uriah said, casually picking at a zit on his chin. "If the museum closes at six, we

arrive at six-thirty. Work for you?"

"Okay by me," said Laurent. His eyebrows waggled wildly. He was psyched, too.

"Uh-huh," Kurt agreed through a giant mouthful of his breakfast sandwich – a smelly mix of pastrami, sauerkraut, and pickle relish.

Uriah flashed a thin-lipped grin at the two dudes. Laurent's barrel-chested brawn and Kurt's roly-poly heft would come in handy if they ran into any nosy guards at the museum.

Not that I *need* them or nothing, Uriah thought with a sniff. I'm *still* a loner. They'll just come in handy, is all.

Ah, but what about Nigel? Uriah thought. His eyes swung downward. Just as he'd expected, Nigel was sitting on the floor, leaning unobtrusively against the breezeway banister. His thin, tanned face looked morose and his brown eyes seemed troubled. Nigel, thought Uriah, was one sniveling puppy dog of a gang member.

I oughtta cut him loose right now, Uriah thought in annoyance. Dude's completely lost his edge. Some girl – like his mother – must have gotten under his skin!

Uriah glared at Nigel.

"I *said*, does that work for you, Nigel?"

"Huh?" Nigel stammered, gazing up at Uriah. "Uh, yeah, sure. There's just one thing I don't get. Why are we going to the museum after closing time?"

"To have fun, dork," Uriah sputtered. "To have fun."

Did he have to spell everything out for these lame-os?

Uriah checked out Laurent's vacant, slack-jawed stare, Kurt's flabby belly and yellow teeth, and Nigel's baby-smooth skin and floppy brown hair. He sighed. Amateurs! He *did* have to spell his plan out. Which stank, because spelling was his worst subject.

"Listen," he began irritably. "Rumour's going around that there's a monster or a ghost or somethin' at the Heatherfield Museum."

Nigel had pulled himself to his feet and was beginning to plod down the breezeway to the main building, heading for his first-period class. Shrugging, Uriah fell into step beside him. Naturally, Laurent and Kurt followed.

"If the rumour's true," Uriah continued, "I want to see it."

"But that's just gossip," Nigel protested. "And we could get into big trouble!"

"So?" Uriah snapped. "Nothing ever *happens* in this dump of a city."

Just the thought of it ticked Uriah off. He stomped up the stone steps of the main school building with such force he could feel his skinny knees jangling. He needed some action. It wasn't right to keep growing guys cooped up in– ugh– school! It wasn't natural, when you thought about it.

"Y'know," Kurt said, taking another monstrous bite of his sandwich, "Uriah's right. This place's a sleeper."

"That's the problem," Uriah said. "I'm *bored*, man!"

Nigel shot Uriah an alarmed, wide-eyed stare. It was clear that he'd rather be safe – and bored – than seek adventure with his crew.

Uriah rolled his eyes. Lame! He tried to console himself by imagining what Nigel would look like tonight, when he ran into some creature from the black lagoon–type thing in the dark halls of the Heatherfield Museum. It would be better than a horror movie, *without* the price of admission.

Uriah almost jumped up and down at the thought. But just before his oversized high-

tops left the floor, he squelched the impulse. Bouncing around in excitement? *Definitely* uncool.

So instead, Uriah just slung his arm around Nigel's shoulders. He leaned all his weight on the skinny kid, making him stumble and struggle. As Nigel winced with discomfort, Uriah grinned with satisfaction. Then he declared, "Tonight's gonna be different! Tonight is mine. It's gonna be Uriah's world!"

SIX

Cornelia looked at her watch, then huffed in frustration. She couldn't see the time. It was too dark, as she crouched in the shadows next to the Heatherfield Museum's front steps.

Luckily, Will had had the same impulse. And while Cornelia's watch was a fancy, gold one, Will's was chunky, with a glow-in-the-dark face. When she pressed a button on the watch's edge, a smiling frog on the face glowed green, and Will could read the time.

"It's six-fifteen," she murmured.

Cornelia gazed at the glowy little frog. Will's passion for frogs was just *one* of the things Cornelia didn't get about her new friend. Even when she had been little, Cornelia had never gone gaga over stuffed animals or stickers. After all, she'd been a serious skater

since she was six. And when it came to fashion, Cornelia had always been more comfortable in a flowing skirt and sassy little shawl than Will's look – slouchy jeans, gummy bracelets, an array of hoodies, and slumped shoulders to match.

Cornelia sighed. She felt weary. She felt old – older, anyway, than her fellow Guardians. Did the others really understand how low they'd all sunk?

We're one step away from becoming total hoodlums! Cornelia thought, feeling a tiny flutter of panic in her chest. After all, we've been sneaking into places on a weekly basis. First it was Elyon's abandoned house, then our maths teacher's hall closet. But tonight, it's the Heatherfield Museum, which is a much bigger deal. If we're caught, they'll throw us in jail! And I can't really see us saving the world if we're stuck behind bars!

Hopefully, Cornelia thought, gritting her teeth, our magic will make sure that that doesn't happen.

Once again, Will's thoughts seemed to echo Cornelia's own. Will clenched her right hand in a fist and glanced at her companions.

"Are we ready?" she asked them.

"The coast is clear, Will," Cornelia said, glancing around. "Nobody in sight."

Will flashed Cornelia a grateful smile – one that made Cornelia feel a twinge of guilt. She'd been chafing under Will's leadership ever since the girls had become Guardians. She'd questioned everything Will had said – or simply looked sullen and surly while Will spoke.

Lately, Cornelia had to admit, Will had been leading them with a bit more confidence. Cornelia couldn't help being comforted by that as Will got ready to transform the five ordinary girls into superhuman Guardians.

"Okay," Will whispered to the group. "Come closer to me."

Cornelia and company crowded in. When they'd formed a tight circle, Will closed her eyes and squeezed both hands at her sides. Cornelia watched as Will's face grew animated. It almost looked as if she were having a silent conversation with some heavenly force. Then, beams of glowing, bright-pink magic began to peek through her right fist. Will threw her head back, her back arching and legs tensing.

She gasped. Magic was surging through her!

As the magic crested, Will thrust out her fist and unclenched her fingers. Hovering above her palm was the Heart of Candracar. Within its asymmetrical silver clasp, the marble-sized glass orb pulsed with power.

"Hay Lin," Will cried. "Air!"

A silver teardrop of magic shot out of the Heart and soared over toward the smallest Guardian. She threw her arms above her head in a gesture of freedom as the teardrop whizzed around her, transforming her from girl to, well, supergirl!

"Irma," Will shouted next. "Water!"

This time the magic teardrop was blue.

Then Will sent a fiery orange one to Taranee.

Finally, she turned to Cornelia. Cornelia gulped at the air, like someone preparing to plunge into a cold lake.

"Cornelia," Will shouted. "Earth!"

The magic teardrop was green this time. Cornelia braced herself as the orb began to whirl around her, leaving trails of magic on her skin like a gossamer sheath.

Cornelia felt her eyes squeeze shut and her head move backwards. Her transformation from girl to Guardian had begun.

Its first glimmer was a surge of heat in Cornelia's chest. Within seconds, the warmth morphed into jets of electric energy, shooting up her arms. Cornelia could actually feel her muscles lengthening and tightening.

She gasped.

After that, her mind shut down. She felt her body contract as the magic suffused her every cell. Her clothes began to swirl away. Cornelia felt her legs lengthen and her body change. Delicate, feathery wings unfurled from her back with a soft, crackling sound. She felt her blonde hair – silkier and smoother and even longer than before – fall gracefully around her shoulders. And, at last, the pressure caused by the transformation eased. When Cornelia opened her eyes, she saw that her friends had also completed their miraculous mutations.

The five girls blinked at each other, admiring their funky, striped leggings, their fluttery wings, their kickin' skirts and midriff-baring tops. They also appraised – a bit shyly – the now grown-up bodies within those cool outfits.

They had become women. Wise, beautiful, magical, and, most of all, strong!

And they were ready for their new, not-so-

favourite after-school activity – breaking and entering.

"Where should we go in?" Irma asked, gazing with dread at the imposing, cryptlike museum.

"Let's try the windows in the back," Will suggested. She began to lead the group away from the building's front steps.

"But what about the alarms?" Cornelia asked. "Did you think of that, Will?"

"Sure!" Will said. Even in the dim light, Cornelia couldn't miss the flush of pride upon her friend's newly angular cheeks. "If my power works with the appliances in my house, it should work with the ones here, too!"

Oh, right, Cornelia thought. I'd almost forgotten about Will's bizarro ability to chat with her refrigerator (which even had the stuffy, British accent of a proper butler). Her computer and printer talked to her, too – when they weren't arguing with each other. In fact, Will could communicate with all of her electronic gadgets, from her cell phone to her cranky, old television set.

It was all a little too Saturday-morning-cartoon for Cornelia. She hated *cute* and made no secret of it. But now, Cornelia realised, with

another twinge of guilt, Will's dorky power might really come in handy! If, that is, the museum's surveillance cameras cared to listen to her.

We'll find out soon enough, Cornelia thought as the girls rounded a corner and approached the back of the museum. There's a camera right next to that window near the Dumpster.

With her friends clustered behind her, Will positioned herself below the window.

"Um, excuse me?" she squeaked. "I was wondering if . . ."

"You're here about the creatures, yes?"

The camera was speaking to Will! Its red light flickered and flashed with every syllable. It spoke in a brisk, New England accent.

"Er – yes!" Will replied.

"But you are not policemen!" the camera said skeptically.

"Not exactly," Will said, with a shrug. "But, we might be able to figure out who the creatures are."

"Well . . ."

Cornelia held her breath. Had Will convinced the camera? Cornelia herself would have been a little less sweet, a little more authoritative.

"Okay, go in," the camera said at last.

Cornelia sighed, with a mixture of relief and a bit of disappointment.

Will's approach wins the game *again*, she thought. Huh!

As the girls prepared to enter, the camera warned them: "Remember, no funny stuff!"

"So trusting!" Taranee muttered sarcastically.

"It's a security camera," Irma pointed out. "It's only doing its job!"

Meanwhile, Will and Cornelia were eyeing the window. It was about eight feet off the ground, and there wasn't exactly a ladder lying in front of it. Taranee and Irma joined hands to give Will a boost. Balancing on her friends' strong arms, Will tentatively raised the window. It wasn't locked! Jackpot!

As Will slipped inside the museum, Cornelia watched her turn to the camera one last time.

"Is it really okay?" she asked cautiously.

"Go on!" the camera said impatiently to the girls. "I'll close my eye."

The camera's red light went dark. Then Will was swallowed up by blackness as she shimmied through the window. The other

Guardians gazed up after her, collectively holding their breath.

Where *is* she? Cornelia thought after a long, long moment.

Finally, Will stuck her head back out through the window.

"I don't see any guards," she whispered. "C'mon in!"

The other girls helped each other up into the window, one by one. Hay Lin, who could fly, after all, darted in last.

The girls began creeping quietly down a dark, echoing corridor toward the art wing. After a few minutes, they reached a small, shadowy gallery.

"Here it is!" Irma whispered. "This is where it happened. Do you sense anything?"

Cornelia looked around. All she saw were looming oil paintings, walls painted a golden ocher, and spotlights giving off a dim, after-hours glow. Will was the first to respond.

"I don't think so." Will said, shrugging.

"But the portal must be in here somewhere," Hay Lin protested. She drifted further into the gallery. "Let's all concentrate."

The girls fanned out through the room. Will inspected each corner, and Irma peered

up at the ceiling. Cornelia wandered over to a particularly large, medieval painting. Then she gasped.

"Oh, no!"

"What is it?" Taranee squeaked, running over and clutching at Cornelia's shoulders. The other girls gathered around the painting, too.

"Look at this painting!" Cornelia cried.

She pointed a slender finger at the enormous canvas. It was a broad view of a medieval village, populated by hordes of plump and cheerful townspeople, bustling around a town square. Normally, Cornelia would have passed by that sort of traditional oil painting with no more than a glance.

But this painting had one detail – right there in the middle – that transfixed Cornelia. And not with its brilliance.

No, this painted scene made her freeze in terror!

SEVEN

Cornelia trembled as she pointed at the painting. Her gesture sent fear surging through Will like a sudden chill. When *Cornelia* let her guard down, things were *not* good!

Taranee squinted at a gold plaque next to the picture's ornate, gilt frame.

"It's called *The Never-Ending Spring*, by Elias Van Dahl," she pointed out.

Will glanced at the painting. It was a picture of an ancient, European village. In a square fronting a huge, Gothic cathedral, dozens of townspeople were depicted bustling about, dealing with street merchants, walking animals to market, juggling. They smiled and laughed. It was a sunny scene.

It's pretty nice! Will thought. Much cheerier than those dour Gothic paintings they

show us at school. But is this any time for an art appreciation moment? How do I gently tell Cornelia to get with the pro–

"Look at that person there in the painting," Cornelia blurted out, butting in to the middle of Will's thoughts. "Near that house."

Will and the others followed Cornelia's finger, which pointed to a cluster of people in the center of the painting. Beneath the eaves of a homey Tudor cottage stood a teenage girl. Her straw-coloured hair hung in two long braids. Her blue eyes were pale and wan. And on her long, light blue tunic was a symbol – an assemblage of green-and-white half-circles and triangles.

"Elyon!" Hay Lin cried.

"Oh, man!" Irma gasped as she peered at the tiny girl on the canvas. "If that isn't her, it looks a *lot* like her."

"How – how'd she get into the painting?" Taranee shrieked.

"Actually," said a bone-chilling voice. "I'm behind you, girls!"

The girls spun around in alarm. Elyon hadn't lied. In an instant, she'd somehow leaped from her spot in the painting to the gallery floor. Now she stood before them – a defiant enemy.

"You!" Irma said accusingly.

"Hello," Elyon said. Will winced. The Elyon she'd briefly known in Heatherfield had now all but disappeared. This girl was heartless. Her voice was dry as dust and full of cruelty. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and cold. And boy, was she angry!

A sense of foreboding filled Will's body.

Elyon, she told herself, isn't here simply to talk to us. She means us harm! I can feel it!

Will grabbed Taranee's arm and gave it a squeeze. At the same time, she turned to glance at Hay Lin. She was just opening her mouth to call out a warning when Elyon beat her to the punch.

"This time," the soulless girl announced, with an evil grin, "I've come to say . . . goodbye!"

Elyon lifted her hands and a surge of icy white power hurtled from her palms. The magic grabbed the Guardians before they could even begin to react. In an instant, the five girls found themselves trapped in a giant, clear bubble. Will banged on the wall of the bubble with angry fists, but she knew it was probably to no avail. When the Guardians had been impris-

oned in Metamoor, they'd been tossed into bubbles just like this one. It was as thin and flexible as cellophane, but, at the same time, as cold and impenetrable as a diamond. The girls were caught!

Elyon wasn't the only witness to their humiliation. While she gazed at her captives with a tight little smile, another figure emerged from a corner of the art gallery. He was clapping his hands, an amused smirk on his face.

"Good strike, Elyon," the man said. His face was pale and chiseled. A silky curtain of blonde hair swung around his shoulders.

At the man's praise, Elyon's smile grew tighter.

"I'm becoming quite good, aren't I?" she said as she continued to stare the Guardians down. Then she spoke to the girls.

"As you can see," she pointed out, "I also have magical powers. And whether you like it or not, I'm stronger than all of you!"

Irma glared at Elyon. But when she turned to Will, her face was pale and filled with fear.

"That man," she said. "He's– "

"Cedric," Elyon confirmed. "My date from the bookshop."

Will cringed. Cedric! He was the one

who'd lured Elyon away! He'd invited her to meet him for a date at the school gym. Boy-crazy Elyon had been so nervous, she'd begged Irma, Hay Lin, and Will to meet them there as well. But when the three girls had arrived, there'd been no sign of Elyon and Cedric. Instead, the girls had met a giant, blue, rock-headed thug and a hideous snake-man, both of whom had tried to throw the newly anointed Guardians into a fiery pit!

I'll never forget that snake-man's horrible red eyes, Will thought. Not if I live to be a hundred years old.

"When we first saw Cedric at the Halloween dance," Elyon reminisced giddily, "he looked like this. But you've also seen him in a very different light."

With that, Cedric began to change! His pointy chin got pointier. His steely, blue eyes morphed into reptilian, red slits. His torso expanded until it became a hulking thorax. And his legs turned into a long, slithery, green tail.

Will gasped in horror. The very snake-man she'd just been reminiscing about had suddenly appeared before them! He was Cedric! Or rather, Cedric was he!

Will gazed at Elyon with new horror. How could she align herself with someone so evil, so cruel, so, so uncute!?

"Surprised?" Elyon said. "Oh, I was like you, at first. But then Cedric told me things. Many things. Incredible secrets that, tonight, I want to share with you."

"What's happened to you, Elyon?" Will cried. "You're not the same!"

"Look who's talking," Elyon answered, with a dry laugh. "Look in the mirror, Will. In case you haven't noticed, you've sprouted a pair of wings!"

Will suddenly realised that she could, indeed, see her reflection in the glassy wall of the floating prison. When she focused on it, she almost cried out. She still wasn't used to this magical version of herself – tall and lithe, with a new, angular face, and curvy figure. It was all too unreal!

Will shook her head.

This is no time for an identity crisis, she scolded herself. This is about Elyon!

So Will pressed her face to the interior of the bubble. Her own reflection blurred, but Elyon's frosty face became more focused. Will stared at her former friend with brutal intensity.

"Listen to me, Elyon," she implored. "Open your eyes. Forget Cedric. This world – earth – is your home."

"You're wrong, Will," Elyon said coolly. "I belong to Metamoor."

Cedric slithered forward. The curled end of his hideous tail rose from the floor and caressed Elyon's cheek. Will recoiled in disgust, but Elyon closed her eyes and smiled as if Cedric were nothing but a kindly father, patting her on the head.

"Metamoor belongs to you, princess," Cedric hissed through his jagged, reptilian teeth. "You and your brother, Phobos."

"Phobos!" Will gasped.

That was the name of the man depicted in the green-and-white symbol on Elyon's tunic – the Seal of Phobos. Many of the objects, in fact, that had tripped up both them *and* the baddies who had stalked the Guardians were marked with that seal. Will had seen it on a book that had spewed choking, black sludge all over Cornelia's bedroom and on the uniforms of the soldiers of the army that had chased them all over Metamoor.

Now Cedric was saying that the man behind the Seal was Elyon's brother?!

Of all the bizarre revelations Will had weathered since becoming a Guardian, this one was the strangest!

EIGHT

Elyon glared at the bubble she had just created. In the aftermath, her fingertips tingled, her head buzzed, and her vision went blurry. Mustering enough magic to ensnare the five Guardians of the Veil had been draining.

And hiding her shakiness from her former friends was more energy-sapping still.

But it was also a necessity. Elyon had to hide any – every – sign of weakness from those traitorous girls. She was royal. She was above them. She had more magic alone than the five of them put together.

The Guardians' bubble prison was floating in the middle of the gallery. Taranee was clutching Will's shoulders in fear. Irma's and Hay Lin's hands were clasped. And Cornelia was squeezed in the middle of the group,

glaring at Elyon with hurt in her eyes.

Of the five angry looks trained on Elyon, this was the only one that gave her a minor twinge. After all, once upon a time, Cornelia and Elyon had been the best of friends. They'd exchanged notes in every class, and eaten lunch together at their "special" table in the school cafeteria. Elyon had known the nooks and crannies of Cornelia's room as well as she'd known her own. The girls had confided to each other about all their crushes and dreams.

Elyon perked up a bit as memories of a former life began to seep into her thoughts. That life was dim now. She could barely fathom what it had been like to gossip her way through classes and after-school snacks; to giggle her way through dates and soccer practise; to draw happy doodles on all of her notebooks; and to sit on the beach, simply enjoying the sun on her pale skin and the sound of the crashing waves. All of those joys were absent from the weatherless world that made up Metamoor.

Suddenly, a reprimanding voice rang through Elyon's head, making her wince slightly in pain. She took a deep breath.

Remember, it was all a lie.

To whom the voice belonged, Elyon wasn't sure. Cedric? Phobos? Herself?

All that really mattered was that the voice spoke the truth. Reminiscing about life on earth was as pointless as eating cotton candy. After all, Elyon's life on earth had been just as substanceless as feathery, spun sugar.

"Those days," she muttered to herself grimly, "are over now. And I'm going to tell these silly girls why."

Elyon took a deep, calming breath. As she did, she felt her fingers cease their trembling. Her heavy-lidded eyes brightened a bit. Her strength was returning. She was ready to share her story.

"My parents," Elyon began, "died when I was still a baby. Phobos found a nurse for me. He trusted this creature with my life."

Elyon watched the Guardians exchange wary glances. After a moment, they returned their attention to Elyon.

Elyon took another deep breath and continued. She made her voice flat and soulless. Emotion would sully her message. Emotion was her enemy.

"My nurse betrayed my brother's trust,"

Elyon said matter of factly. "She agreed to kidnap me with a couple of officials. They took me far, far away. They used the Seal of Phobos to open a portal in the Veil. And that is how I arrived here on earth."

"The two officials told everyone they were my parents," Elyon said. Images of the liars she'd called Mum and Dad flashed through her mind. She saw Mum's sweet, pointy-chinned face and coppery hair. She caught a glimpse of Dad's soft brown eyes and easy smile.

No!

Elyon forced those people – those traitors – out of her thoughts. They were not her parents at all. They never had been. Ever. And neither was the other one.

"My nurse," Elyon continued. "Well, you already know her. She changed herself into a woman with blonde hair and big glasses. She bought herself a bunch of cardigan sweaters, and she found a job as a maths teacher."

"Mrs. Rudolph?" Will asked.

Elyon nodded. She knew the Guardians had already discovered Mrs. Rudolph's other identity. When they'd accidentally seen their teacher in her Metamoorian form – big floppy

ears, reptilian skin, and all – they'd freaked. In fact, they'd chased Mrs. Rudolph through a portal back to Metamoor. Now she was living in hiding, somewhere in Elyon's new world. But she'd still managed to help the Guardians when they'd been in need. The thought of it made a ball of fury well up inside of Elyon. She clenched her fists as she answered Will.

"Yes, Mrs. Rudolph," she said. "Under her watch, and those of my 'adopted parents,' I've grown up among you. Among deception and lies! I loved and respected a pair of traitors who tore me away from my *real* family."

"What – what are you saying, Elyon?" Cornelia whispered.

"The truth!" Elyon barked. She glanced fondly up at Cedric's snaky face. She barely even noticed anymore when he morphed from his handsome blond self into this leering, green, scaly one. In both guises, Cedric was her friend. Her mentor. And the source of her great gift – her power.

"Cedric opened my eyes," Elyon said to the Guardians. "Do you remember that afternoon after the Halloween party when Cedric invited me to his bookshop? I thought he was trying to

get to know me better. But he already knew everything about me."

Elyon still remembered the rush of trepidation and excitement she'd felt when she had entered Cedric's store that day. Moments later – among stacks of dusty old books and streams of late-afternoon sunlight – Cedric had told her everything. He'd called her princess! Because that's what she was – the heir to Metamoor's throne.

"Suddenly, everything that had been hidden from me was brought to light," Elyon told her prisoners. "I finally knew who I was. And I also knew who *you* were. The Guardians of the Veil. The enemies of Metamoor!"

"Enemies!" Will burst out, pressing her hands to the wall of the bubble. "I don't know what 'truth' Cedric told you, but we have a different version. Elyon– "

"Shut up!" Elyon screamed. She ran up to the bubble and banged on its rock-hard surface with her fists. She felt a stab of pain travel up her skinny arms with every strike, but she couldn't contain her rage. First, her friends betrayed her. *Now* they tried to deceive her? To play with her head and make her question her beliefs? How *dare* they!

"Because of the Veil that you protect," Elyon gasped, "the people of Metamoor are bound to live inside a cage. They have no way out."

Elyon felt tears well up in her eyes. Oh, no! Tears were a sign of weakness. For an instant, Elyon tried to fight them. A moment later, she gave up. She was beyond caring about preserving her chilly demeanour. It was too late for that.

"Because of the Veil you protect," Elyon continued, her voice going shrill, "my brother, Phobos, has been looking for me for *years* without being able to find me. Because of the Veil you protect, my life was not my own! And that is why I hate you, Guardians."

Irma stepped to the front of the bubble and gazed pleadingly at Elyon.

"We were friends once," she whispered.

"That's right, Irma," Elyon said, backing away from the bubble. "But I don't know you anymore. Look at yourselves. You've grown up. You've become so beautiful. You've changed!"

"You've changed, too!" Hay Lin cried.

Elyon's rage ebbed away. Her anger was replaced by a dull, pounding pain deep in her

gut. Hay Lin was right. She took a deep breath.

"I have changed," Elyon said proudly. Cedric's tail coiled around her protectively as she spoke. "After I stopped the impostors who told me they were my parents, and after I passed though the Veil and found my real home in Metamoor, I discovered the real me."

"And you discovered hidden powers," Cedric prompted in his hissing, slithery voice.

"Yes," Elyon agreed.

Elyon raised her hands. She looked at them contemplatively as she prepared herself for what she was about to do. Her body began to hum with the tremendous power the task would require. Every muscle began to tighten painfully. Her fingertips spat white-hot sparks, and the pain in her gut mounted.

But Elyon's mind was numb.

Which only made her job easier.

Kzaaaaammmm!

"Feel that?" Elyon shouted as she hurled a concentrated shower of magic at the Guardians' bubble. The magic formed a crackling band that stretched between Elyon and the cell. It began to rattle. "It's called 'absolute power'!" Elyon shook with power.

"Aaaaiggh!" Taranee screamed inside the

bubble. She looked to Will for guidance. "What's happening?"

Ha! Elyon thought. Even the Keeper of the Heart can't worm her way out of this one.

"I don't know," Will shouted. "But we've got to get out of this prison. Come on – let's try together to break out of here!"

Elyon began to laugh as she watched the girls pound together on the magic bubble.

"Nuh-uh, girls," she taunted. "It's no use! You've lost! And soon you'll understand all of Metamoor's pain. Soon you'll understand what it means to live as prisoners, far from everything . . . *forever*!"

Elyon gave the band of magic a final thrust. Then she threw her hands down, breaking the connection between herself and the bubble. The prison evaporated into thin air.

But the Guardians weren't freed. Instead, they began to hurtle into oblivion – a vacuum with no dimensions, no time, no space! An exile like no other!

The girls became wispy, ephemeral, and increasingly tiny. In a few moments, Elyon could barely see them anymore. But she could hear their final screams before a great white

light swallowed them up.

The sound made her smile tightly.

And then, the Guardians were gone. Nothing remained of five human lives but a wisp of steam, a remnant of magic.

"Excellent, Elyon!" Cedric cried, clapping his hands together again. The sound echoed on the gallery's cold walls. "Really excellent."

Elyon tried to smile, but she found she couldn't. She was too drained to feel triumph.

Revenge must be like cotton candy, too, she mused dully. Its sweetness melts away in an instant.

"Prince Phobos will be satisfied," Cedric continued. His exaltations jangled through Elyon's head like the incessant tolling of a bell. "Candracar's five little meddlers are not a problem anymore. This time, nothing will be able to save them!"

NINE

Kurt plodded up the stone walkway to the Heatherfield Museum. He was trailing behind Uriah, focusing on the gang leader's floppy red sneakers. Every time Uriah lifted his foot, Kurt tried to put his own tattered, red high-top in the exact same spot.

This was a little game Kurt liked to play. He imagined he was a soldier, tracking an enemy through the snow. He'd come up with it because he *always* seemed to be trailing Uriah. He followed him from the 'hood to school, from school to detention, and from detention to whatever scheme his redheaded mentor had cooked up next.

This scheme is the coolest one yet, Kurt thought with a guttural giggle. We're breaking into the museum to battle a monster.

Like Knight Schneider in *Goth Slam II*! Yeah! *Byrrr! Byrrr! Byrrr!* I got you, dragon! *Yah-ha!*

"Kurt!" Uriah hissed. He stopped so suddenly that Kurt plowed right into his bony back. Well, his stomach did, anyway. Kurt's stomach arrived everywhere about a half second before the rest of him.

Uriah glared over his shoulder at Kurt.

"Shaddup!" he hissed. "You want us caught before we even get in there? Doof!"

"I didn't say nothin'," Kurt protested.

"You're dead, dragon," Laurent teased. He shoved at Kurt with his meaty fist.

"Oh, uh, did I say that out loud?" Kurt said. He felt his eyes bugging out in confusion. "Whoops."

"Whatever," Uriah said. He rolled his eyes. "Just can it once we're in the museum. You don't want to be the weak link in the gang, do ya?"

"Hey, too late," Laurent guffawed.

"Guys," Nigel said nervously. Kurt glanced back at him. He was trailing reluctantly behind all of them. "Would you . . . would you just please keep it down? C'mon!"

Kurt clamped his fleshy lips together as the gang sauntered around the museum. It wasn't

hard. He just willed himself to stop thinking about video game dragons. Instead, he thought about . . . lunch! Today he'd made himself a few roast-beef sandwiches. With Snack Doodles thrown in for crunch and Tasti-whip, straight from the can, for dessert. Yummmmm . . .

"Lookit!" Laurent said, interrupting Kurt's daydream. "They even left the window open."

Kurt blinked. Sure enough, Laurent was pointing up at a wide-open window.

"Aw," Kurt groused. "And they say they don't *want* people to steal from museums. They shouldn't be so careless."

"Don't complain!" Uriah said with a devilish grin. "Follow me."

Uriah catapulted his skinny self up to the window ledge. He slipped through the open window as slickly as a snake.

"Uh-oh," Kurt whispered. The window was at least eight feet off the ground. Kurt barely cleared five. He gave Nigel and Laurent pleading glances.

They looked pointedly at his jiggling gut.

They gazed up at the window.

After a few complaining sighs, they finally joined hands and kneeled in front of Kurt. Flashing them a grateful grin, Kurt stepped

into the boost and scrambled up the museum wall. He flopped his upper body through the open window.

"Dude!" Nigel grunted from his spot on the ground. "Time to cut down on the snacks!"

Kurt flailed his short legs around in an effort to squirm the rest of himself through the window. Finally he made it, landing on the marble floor with a fleshy splat.

I'm in, he thought with relief.

While Laurent and Nigel hoisted themselves through the window after him, Kurt pulled a flashlight out of the back pocket of his baggy jeans. He clicked it on and followed Uriah into the main corridor of the museum. It was a long aisle, lined with a bunch of medieval artifacts.

Kurt's flashlight beam swept across coats of arms, moldy old tapestries, and tarnished suits of armour.

Museums, he thought dully. Educational. *Soooo* borrrrring. *Yawwwwn.*

He plodded along. But as his flashlight glimmered off another suit of armour, a realisation suddenly wormed its way into his head.

Hey, wait a minute, he thought. Those are

knights' clothes. Like Knight Schneider. Yeah!

Before he knew it, Kurt was back in *Goth Slam II*. He could almost hear the metallic clang of a sword landing on a steel breastplate. Yeah! *Byrrr! Byrrr!*

"Kurt!" Laurent hissed, jolting Kurt out of his video game fantasy. "Turn that flashlight off, man!"

Kurt stuck his lower lip out, but he obeyed Laurent's orders. As the flashlight went black, Kurt blinked hard. He was seeing spots – and little else.

"We should be as quiet as cats," Uriah announced to the guys as they approached the end of the aisle. A door at the corridor's end led to the museum's art wing. That was where the monster was rumoured to be lurking.

"Yeah," Uriah continued with a cackle. "We'll pretend we're pumas."

Pumas! Kurt perked up. Pumas were even cooler than knights!

"Yeah, yeah," Kurt giggled. "Quiet, like pumas!"

Kllaaaannnnggg! Crash. Rattle-rattle-rattle.

"Owwwww," Kurt groaned. He shook his head and swiped a hank of mud-brown hair

out of his eyes. When he looked around, his eyes widened.

Now he really *was* starring in his very own episode of *Goth Slam II*! His pudgy fingers were closed around the hilt of a medieval sword and he was surrounded by – knight parts! There was an arm in his lap, a foot a few feet away, even a knight's head bobbling around him like a runaway hubcap!

Did I black out while I was waging battle? Kurt wondered. Am I a war hero?

Uh, that would be a big no.

But Kurt *was* a klutz who'd crashed right into a suit of armour. That fact was confirmed by Uriah's wrathful, spotty face, swooping in close to snarl at him.

"*What* are you doing?" he hissed.

"Not my fault," Kurt grunted. He used the sword to push himself to his feet. "You made me turn off my flashlight. I can't see anything!"

Nigel trotted over. *His* face was paler than the moonlight shining through the museum windows.

"If there are security guards around, they *definitely* heard that noise," he gasped. "Let's get outta here!"

"If you want to leave, do it," Uriah said with a threatening sneer on his face. "But you'll hafta get past me!"

Uriah turned to face his crew head-on. As he lectured them, he started backing up. He was moving toward the door that led to the art galleries – and blocking Nigel's path. With each step away from his crew, he became fuzzier, melting into the shadows of the dark corridor.

"We've come here to catch a monster," Uriah declared from the dark. "And we ain't leaving until we see at least one!"

Bump!

"Oof!" Uriah grunted. He'd knocked into something. Kurt cringed, waiting for a crash of armour. Or the clattery tumble of a tapestry.

Instead, he heard a voice. It was a growly voice – both sinister and smirking. And it came from very, very high above the gang.

"Are you looking for something, boys?" the voice said.

Suddenly, a man – make that a creature! – stepped into the gallery. He was about a dozen feet tall, with an angry red mask over his eyes. He had green, reptilian skin, a long shock of dusty blonde hair, and a snaky tail that slith-

ered around the gallery like a sensor.

Next to the terrifying figure was another monster. This one was bright blue! He was half the snake-man's height, but twice his girth. The lumpish horns on his head resembled rocks. His jagged teeth were bared as he growled at the boys.

Uriah squealed as the snake-man gave him a shove. He fell sprawling on the floor. Laurent shrieked loudly and stumbled backward. Nigel stood frozen beside Kurt, his face even whiter than before.

The loudest scream of all didn't come from Laurent, Kurt, or even Nigel.

"AAAGHHH!" Uriah cried, with his face frozen in fear.

But Kurt didn't feel terrified. Not exactly. He didn't feel brave, either. What he felt like was a warrior!

Kurt planted his fleshy feet on the marble floor. He tightened his grip around the sword that was, miraculously, still clutched in his hand. He was ready to fight!

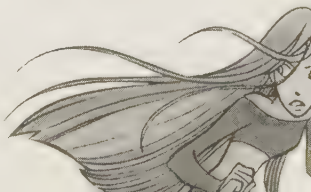
TEN

Cornelia was sure she was the first of her friends to recognise what Elyon had just done to them.

Elyon and Cornelia had been best friends once. If anyone understood how Elyon's mind worked, it was Cornelia. And here's what Cornelia knew: before Elyon had defected to Metamoor, she had longed for escape of a different kind. She had never liked the messiness of real life – unrequited crushes, nasty school lunches, annoying parents, maths homework.

Whenever these things had really freaked her out, Elyon had retreated into art, drawing and painting for hours. Art was where Elyon had felt most at home.

So, now, she's made a



work of art *our* home, Cornelia thought. She's sent us into that painting. We've replaced her there!

Grimly, Cornelia surveyed the scene in which the Guardians had just landed.

They were standing by a well made of rough-hewn stone. The street beneath their feet was made of roughly packed dirt. Bustling all around them were plump townspeople. The women wore long, homespun skirts, bonnets, and tight bodices bound by leather laces. The men wore suede breeches and belted tunics.

Everyone was busy carrying bulging baskets of bread, vegetables, and meats. Or juggling cannonballs. Or carting banners to a stage in the town square. The banners – fluttering in a sweet-smelling breeze – were printed with suns, flowers, blooming trees, dancing figures, and other symbols of spring.

The townspeople laughed and gossiped. They looked robust and happy. And thus – to Cornelia, at least – they were unspeakably annoying.

These people, she thought incredulously, aren't just stuck in a time warp. They're mired in permanent good moods! And why shouldn't they be? *They* don't have to save the world

with their brand-new magical powers. *They* haven't been banished from their homes by a girl with a serious chip on her shoulder. No, they're simply the stars of *The Never-Ending Spring*. We're part of an invention by What's-his-name Van Dahl!

Hey, wait a minute, Cornelia realised suddenly. Magical powers! I almost forgot! I'm Earth Girl. And what are we standing upon except earth?

Cornelia glanced down at her purple boots. They were smudged with some sort of yellow-brown pigment.

Well, she corrected herself, we're standing on paint that's made to look like earth. Let's hope that's close enough for me to get us out of here! I'll just create a fissure in the earth, and that should rip open the painting's canvas! Sure, it'll mean sacrificing a work of art, but at least we'll be free!

Cornelia gave her friends a sidelong glance. She supposed she should bounce her escape plan off Will before she began to summon up her magic.

But it was Cornelia's idea! If she was successful, not only would the girls be free of this ridiculous painting, but they'd have Cornelia

to thank for it! It might have been petty, but *she* wanted to be the hero once in a blue moon. It was weird always being in Will's shadow.

So – after shooting the jolly townspeople a disdainful, goodbye glance – Cornelia closed her eyes. She sent all her magical energy down to her toes. Behind her closed eyelids, she saw waves of green. Then she felt her entire body begin to thrum with power.

When her magic hit its peak, Cornelia willed herself and her friends out of the painting. In fact, she envisioned them outside of the museum entirely. She'd send them to a grassy refuge or the cradle of a craggy tree.

She'd bring them home.

At last, Cornelia felt her magic melt away. The deed was done. Opening her eyes, she blinked away a few green spots and looked around triumphantly. She couldn't wait to see where the Guardians had landed. They were –

Still in the painting!

Cornelia's mouth dropped open. She and her friend hadn't budged an inch!

But that means, Cornelia wailed inwardly, my magic is useless here! I guess there are *lots* of things I don't get about Elyon. Like all the

tricks she has up her evil sleeve!

Cornelia glanced at her girlfriends' frightened faces. Then she took in all the chortling townspeople milling around them.

Fabulous, she thought irritably. Only minutes ago, we were the five most powerful beings on earth. We had the ability to change the elements, simply by wanting to. But, oh, how quickly things change. Now, we have *no* abilities. We're mere prisoners in a painting!

"Guys," Irma said in a tremulous voice. "I think we have a problem!"

"Where are we?" Hay Lin cried. "What is this place?"

"Don't you get it?" Cornelia yelled. "We're in the painting. Elyon sent us here!"

Taranee gasped. She gaped at a nearby juggler. A couple of other guys were jostling past them with tent poles and canvas. They seemed to be setting up for some sort of outdoor play.

"Who are all these people?" she wondered.

Before the Guardians had a chance to ponder the question, one of the people in the crowd tripped and crashed right into Taranee! The man, who had a brushy mustache and a goofy fez atop his head, sank his elbow into her gut.

"Hey!" Taranee squealed. A fiery spark of anger clouded her face as she regarded the clumsy man. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

"And you!" the man responded. His jovial grin faded as he took in Taranee's striped leggings, bare belly, and sleek tendrils of hair.

Suddenly Cornelia got a sinking feeling in her stomach. Taranee looked like a *thoroughly* modern teenager. All the Guardians did. They really didn't fit into this antique scene.

"Where did you come from?" the man demanded.

His booming voice attracted the attention of the juggler. Not to mention a couple in expensive-looking, velvet robes.

"Look at them!" the juggler cried.

"Who are they?" cried the nobleman's wife.

"They must not be from our country," said another townsperson emphatically.

Cornelia clenched her hands in tight fists.

Here we go, she thought.

Another townie sidled up to the Guardians with an excited grin on her face.

"Are you wanderers?" she asked the girls. "Where is your caravan?"

Yet another woman with a brown-wool

shawl draped over her hair grabbed one of Will's wings and gaped at it.

"Maybe they're artists," she gasped. "Look at how they're dressed!"

"We dress circles around you, frumpy!" Irma yelled. "You can count on it!"

Cornelia rolled her eyes.

It didn't take Irma long to lose her cool, she thought. But what else was new?

Will tried to smooth things over.

"Irma," she whispered, grabbing her friend's elbow. "Let's beat it."

Quickly, the Guardians ducked into the crowd. Dodging their way around a peddler's pushcart and a snuffling mule, they lost the townspeople who'd been scrutinizing them. Now they were in a *new* crowd of people. It seemed that every inhabitant of the painting was thronging the streets!

Looking around her uncomfortably, Will whispered, "We need to get back to our old selves. We attract too much attention dressed like this."

"Okay," Hay Lin said, agreeing quickly with Will. "Let's change, then."

Before Cornelia could discourage her, Hay Lin thrust her hands to her sides and closed

her eyes. Her face scrunched with concentration. But no silvery swirls of magic emanated from her fingertips. When Hay Lin opened her eyes a moment later, she was still a glam superbabe. She gaped down at herself.

"B– but," she gasped.

"Nothing happened!" Will said, confused. "Why didn't we change?"

"Our powers don't work anymore," Cornelia announced sullenly. She'd just begun getting *used* to being magical. And now her powers were being snatched away? Could this whole Guardian gig be any *more* unfair?

"Powers?" asked a bewildered voice behind the Guardians. Cornelia covered her mouth and spun around to see a new group of townspeople giving the girls the fish-eye.

"What are they talking about?" a man in a pointy beard wondered aloud.

"They must be illusionists," said a round-cheeked woman. But she looked skeptical.

That was when three soldiers in leather armour, steel helmets, and tall, suede boots broke through the crowd. Resting his hand on the hilt of his sword, the head knight declared, "Or they might be something worse. Witches!"

"Uh . . . guys?" Will whispered to the other

Guardians, backing up a step or two. "These people are afraid of us!"

"I'm more afraid of them," Hay Lin hissed back. She pointed at the soldiers' heavy swords. "They'll slice us into sushi!"

"If they manage to catch us!" Irma cried. She suddenly jumped out of the girls' cluster and ran to the edge of the street, where several merchants had set up their wares. She grabbed the edge of a fruitmonger's wooden table and gave it a mighty heave. Baskets of apples, pears, and melons went flying at the soldiers!

"It's an assault!" the head soldier cried. "Stop!"

And that's our cue to run! Cornelia thought. The girls turned on their heels and dashed into the crowd. But it was hard to really make a break for it with all those people milling around. Cornelia bumped into a doughy woman with a shopping basket on her arm. Irma tripped on the hem of another woman's long cloak. Taranee did a mad side-stepping-maneuver as she tried to dodge around a fortune-teller's table. She finally made it, but not without knocking the mystic's crystal ball to the ground.

"If we don't get out of this crowd, we're sunk," Cornelia announced, the sound of shattering glass ringing in her ears. "They'll catch up to us in a flash."

In fact, Cornelia could already hear the soldiers' gruff voices, wafting over the heads of the townspeople.

"Out of our way now!" one of the soldiers shouted gruffly.

"Stop the witches!" another commanded.

"But where do we go?" Hay Lin cried, spinning in a desperate circle.

Will bit her lip.

Where *do* we go? Cornelia thought. She felt a bubble of panic begin to rise in her chest. We're blocked in!

"I know!" Will suddenly gasped. She squinted at the sun mischievously. "We go up!"

Will pointed at the thatched roof of a nearby cottage. Of course! Up was their way out.

Cornelia pushed her long, flowing skirt out of the way and clambered onto a barrel. From there, she hoisted herself onto a narrow wall. Then, grabbing handfuls of the tightly packed straw, she pulled herself, hand over hand, up to the peak of the roof.

Her friends quickly followed her. When they all arrived at the rooftop, they saw that there were other buildings nearby.

Taller buildings.

Giving each other determined glances, they began climbing again. They tiptoed along the narrow ridgepole atop one roof, then climbed up the stone steps up to a stone turret. At the sound of the soldiers' angry voices, they sped up.

"Wherever we go," Cornelia complained, as she hopped from the turret onto another thatched roof, "someone is after us! In Metamoor it was the same thing!"

"I always dreamed of having people run after me – to get an autograph," Hay Lin sighed wistfully.

"Yeah, but these guys are running after us to disintegrate us," Taranee complained. She struggled to find her footing on the straw rooftop. "That's another thing entirely."

"There they are!" called a voice directly below them. It was the soldiers. They'd been following them through the streets. Now they were gazing up at them fiercely, their swords drawn.

"We're too visible up here!" Will cried,

scrambling backwards on the thatched roof. "Let's go *dow-WWWN*!"

As she spoke, Will's leg suddenly plunged through the straw! The rest of her body quickly followed.

"Ooofff!" Will shrieked as she hit the floor below.

"Will!" the rest of the Guardians cried. But they didn't have very much time to worry about their fallen comrade. They were slipping and sliding towards the hole themselves!

"We're *all* going down!" Irma yelled, scrabbling madly at the straw. It did no good, of course. Soon, all five girls had tumbled into the cottage.

"Ow!" Cornelia screamed as she landed on the dirt floor with a thud.

A housewife sat kneading bread nearby responded with a tremendous screech. That was followed by the slap of the cottage door as it flew open. Two of the helmeted soldiers crowded through the doorway. Their swords flashed in front of them as they glowered at the Guardians.

"You're trapped, girls," the head soldier announced.

"Oh?" Will said. Cornelia watched Will's

large, brown eyes flicker to her right. Subtly, Cornelia glanced over, too. The Guardians were standing right next to the cottage's *back* door! And, in the one bit of luck they'd encountered since arriving in this inhospitable painting, the door was standing open.

"That's what everybody says to us," Will said to the soldiers impudently. "But anyone who knows us knows that we don't take 'trapped' for an answer!"

Cornelia dashed for the door, with her friends right behind her! Cornelia bounded down a couple of stone steps and scanned the cottage's yard quickly.

"This way!" she shouted, veering left. She glanced over her shoulder to urge her friends along. "Quick!"

Unfortunately, while Cornelia was peeking behind her, the *third* soldier was stepping right in front of her! Cornelia ran into his armoured chest with a painful *thwack*! The goon's muscly arms closed around her like a vise.

"And you!" he demanded with an evil grin. "Where do you think you're going?"

"No!" Cornelia grunted, struggling within the soldier's grip. But without her magic strength, she was no match for the big brute.

I promise, Cornelia thought bitterly, *never* to complain about being magical again. If I had my powers right now, I'd wrap this guy in vines as thick as boa constrictors. I'd plant birds' nests in each of his ears. I'd turn his eyebrows into moss!

But in reality, all Cornelia could do was shoot her captor evil looks. He responded with a cocky grin as the other soldiers thundered out of the cottage.

"I've caught them, Captain," Cornelia's brute said, cruelly tightening his grip on her. Now the Guardians really were trapped.

But they weren't speechless.

"Leave me alone, you big, ole monkey!" Cornelia spat at her soldier. She twisted so violently in his grip she actually managed to turn her back on him completely.

That's when the soldier got a good glimpse of Cornelia's wings. His beady, brown eyes widened in shock. And then, in fear.

Aha, Cornelia thought. I'm not magic at the moment. But I still *look* it.

Mischievously, she flexed the muscles in her back, making her feathers flutter and twitch.

"What, what are these beings?" her captor

asked. "Those wings! They're real!"

"Incredible," said one of the other knights. He stumbled forwards to finger Cornelia's wings gingerly. She tried to shake him off. Her feathers were as soft as satin and as iridescent as a dragonfly's wing. They were her favourite part of her magical self, and she *didn't* want to share them. When the head soldier stepped forward with a curious look of his own, Cornelia gave him a swift kick in the shin. It worked. He stayed away from her wings.

But he *did* get angry. Very angry.

"Take them to the palace dungeon!" he ordered his underlings. "I'm going to inform Camerlengo immediately– "

"Don't be in such a big hurry, Captain Schliege," said a voice at the edge of the garden. Cornelia and her friends stared and froze in surprise.

More importantly, the soldiers froze as well! Everyone turned to watch a brown-haired fellow stride into the yard.

"You!" the leader hissed, staring at the man.

Cornelia wondered who the man could be. He certainly didn't *look* powerful enough to cow three armed knights. He had shaggy,

brown hair that fell over his eyes and a thin, pale face. He was extremely slight. His chocolate-brown eyes were large and sad, but his mouth – behind a well-trimmed goatee – was tight-lipped and determined.

"The palace dungeon is not the right place for these kind girls," the man declared.

"Hear that, ya big monkey?" Irma cried. She ran over to Cornelia's captor and grabbed his arm with both hands, wrenching Cornelia from his grip. "Get your paws off of us, and get outta here. Immediately!"

The soldier obliged and unhanded Cornelia. But then he grabbed Irma! With her wrist held firmly in his meaty fist, he gazed pleadingly at the brown-haired mystery man.

"Can I take *her* away, at least?" he begged. "*She*'s not very kind."

Cornelia stifled a snort of laughter.

"No," the man responded. "Inform Camerlengo that these girls are now my guests!"

"But," the soldier began to wheedle, "Mr. Van Dahl . . ."

The man shot the soldier a meaningful glare. That was enough to squelch the knight's protest completely. His shoulders slumped and he motioned brusquely to his men.

Finally, all three of them stomped out of the yard.

When they'd disappeared, the Guardians encircled their saviour. His glare disappeared. Now he merely looked weary. He gathered his flowing, orange cloak more closely around himself, as if he'd caught a sudden chill. The girls gazed at him in quizzical silence, until, of course, Irma spoke up.

"Thanks for your help, mister!" she chirped.

"Oh, no," the man protested, waving a hand humbly. "Please, just call me Elias."

"It didn't take much for you to chase off those soldiers," Irma said with a wide-eyed look. "You must be important, Elias!"

That's it, Irma, Cornelia thought. Don't mince words or anything. Just pry into the guy's business an instant after we've met him!

But Elias didn't seem to mind. He smiled sheepishly and said, "After all these years, I still haven't figured out if they are afraid of me or respect me. Certainly, they owe me a lot."

Cornelia frowned in confusion as she watched Elias gaze wistfully up at the sunny sky. Then he nudged at the painted dirt with the toe of his boot. Finally, he sighed and

looked at the girls with a rueful smile.

"You see," he said wearily, "this sky, this town, these people, even – it's I who created them."

ELEVEN

Nigel wondered when he had last taken a breath.

It was definitely many minutes ago, he decided woozily. In fact, I must have passed out from lack of oxygen. Now I'm dreaming!

That was the only way to explain what he was seeing – a towering, red-eyed snake with long, white hair and a semihuman face!

And, it seemed, the snake-man could also speak, in English! When he and his walruslike blue henchman had lunged toward the gang a moment ago, he'd sounded none too happy to find the guys there.

That makes two of us, Nigel thought.

But Nigel didn't just want to escape the terrifying monsters. He also wanted to

ditch the dudes at his side – his so-called friends.

Nigel glanced at Uriah and Laurent, both of whom were shrieking crazily.

Those tough guys would feed me to the monsters with a cherry on top if it would get them out of here in one piece, Nigel thought. Kurt, too.

Kurt. He was the only member of the crew more hapless than Nigel. Speaking of, where was he?

Nigel scanned the dark gallery for the gang's tubbiest member. When he spotted him, he gasped.

Okay, he thought, his eyes bugging out in shock. Now I *know* I'm dreaming. *Kurt* is our saviour?

But it was true. Kurt had stepped out in front of the other guys. He was wielding a giant sword. The thing was so heavy he could barely lift it over his head. But if he knew how hopeless his heroics were, his face didn't show it. In fact, Kurt's doughy cheeks were flushed with excitement. Under his breath, he was whispering, "*Byrrr! Byrrr!* Take that, dragon!"

Great, Nigel thought. Now we've got two cowards and a delusional maniac. And me?

Well, I'm the idiot, thank you very much.

With a heavy sigh, Nigel realised he'd been living in this state of idiocy for a long time – ever since he'd started hanging with Uriah's gang.

He'd wandered thoughtlessly into his Outfielder status. But once there, he'd found it impossible to claw his way out. Now he was a permanent member of the crew. He was stuck.

Speaking of which, Nigel was still facing down the horrible monsters. And he was still struggling to take a breath! Just when he was sure his lips were turning blue, his lungs took over and clamoured for air. Nigel gasped and sucked in a big gulp of oxygen. He took several deep, rattling breaths.

And then he blinked.

The snake-dude and the big, blue thug were still there. Which meant Nigel *hadn't* passed out and dreamed this up.

The monsters were real!

"Run away!" Uriah screamed, turning to dash back down the long museum corridor.

"Tscha!" Laurent cried, chasing after the gang leader.

But Kurt stood his ground! He even took a flat-footed step towards the big, blue guy,

heaving the sword up in front of his face.

"Stand back!" he ordered the monster in a tremulous voice.

"Kurt!" Nigel cried. He stopped running, then glanced ahead at his fleeing buddies. He looked back at Kurt, quaking before the growling blue giant. What should he do? He couldn't just leave Kurt there to be squashed like a grape. But if he joined the fight, *he'd* be squashed, too!

Nigel shrugged and began running back toward his squat comrade. Before he could reach him, though, the monster leaned over and snarled in Kurt's face.

"Your defiance is very amusing, boy," he said. His voice sounded like gravel drenched in smelly tar. "But if you want to make a dent in me, you'll need something stronger than this toothpick!"

With another growl, the monster swatted at Kurt's sword. It sailed through the air like a dart, landing with a *thwack* in the middle of an oil painting – a very famous still life.

"Aaaagh!" Kurt cried. His eyes widened, as if he, too, were just waking up from a dream. The monster laughed cruelly. Then he lunged at the pudgy kid.

Nigel's feet once again began to move, almost against his will. Before he had a chance to think, he'd grabbed Kurt's shirt collar and yanked him out of the monster's reach.

"Run, Kurt!" he cried, struggling to pull his portly friend down the museum corridor.

Nigel huffed in relief as Kurt finally began to follow him. Together, the boys made a run for it.

But they didn't stay together for long! While Nigel headed for the window at the end of the corridor, Kurt veered into the museum's high-ceilinged foyer. He was running straight for the glass front doors. Nigel was sure those doors were locked *and* equipped with loud alarms. But there was no telling Kurt that. Now that he'd been jolted from his heroic fantasy, he was hysterical!

"The monsters, the monsters!" he screamed as he ran toward the doors. "It's all true!"

"Kurt!" Nigel cried, running after the boy. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Uriah and Laurent hesitate at the end of the corridor. They'd heard Kurt's panic attack.

Soon, they began pounding back through the gallery. They were just as eager as Nigel to

shut Kurt up. Together, Nigel, Uriah, and Laurent burst into the foyer.

"What are you doing?" Nigel hissed to the shrieking Kurt. "This way!"

"Let me out!" Kurt screamed, ignoring Nigel and pounding on the glass doors. "I want out! I want to go home!"

He grabbed the door handle and twisted it desperately. But, of course, Nigel had been right. The doors were bolted shut.

So Kurt found a key . . . of sorts. He grabbed a heavy fire extinguisher from its mount next to the doors, and hurled the tank through the glass! The doors shattered with a tremendous crash.

Weee-oooooh-weeee-oooh!

That would be the alarm I was worried about, Nigel thought wearily. He hung his head in defeat.

But Uriah wasn't going down that easily. He grabbed Kurt away from the still-tinkling glass door and shook him violently.

"You goofball!" he yelled. "If we're caught, it's all your fault!"

"Let's get back to the window in the back of the museum," Laurent snarled. He dashed out of the foyer and began running back up the

corridor. Uriah and Kurt followed him, with Nigel close on their heels.

As Nigel entered the long gallery and veered to his left, he dared to glance over his shoulder at the spot where the snake-man and the blue dude had appeared. Were they getting ready to chase after the boys? Were they arming themselves with snake-venom bombs? Maybe some blue fireballs? Or perhaps some other space-age weapon Nigel couldn't even conceive of?

Actually, the villains looked as though they were . . . leaving! But they weren't walking through any door. Instead, they were standing within a cyclone of strange smoke – cloudy stuff that glinted and glimmered, like phosphorescence on a tropical sea. Clearly, the smoke was some sort of magic! It must have transported the thugs into the museum. Now it was spiriting them away. The creatures began to dim and blur as the smoke coiled and undulated around them, filling their lungs and clouding their vision.

Despite his fear, Nigel found himself staring at the swirling magic. It was mesmerizing!

It was only when he heard a gruff voice call out, "Hey! Stop where you are!" that Nigel was

jolted back to the present. A security guard had finally discovered them!

Nigel turned to run after his friends. As he did, he took one last glance over his shoulder at the fading monsters. They had all but disappeared into the magical smoke. But just before they evaporated entirely, Nigel saw something else!

It was a girl.

She had long, straw-coloured bangs and dark, weary circles beneath her eyes. Standing in front of the looming monsters, she looked tiny. Vulnerable. Resigned.

She also looked vaguely familiar!

But Nigel didn't have a chance to get a good look at her before she faded away. And besides – he had to make a break for it!

He joined the gang as they raced through the gallery toward the window.

"Halt!" the security guard shouted behind them.

"Don't even think about it," Uriah ordered his boys. "Get outta here. Quick! Quick!"

"Stop!" the guard bellowed once more.

And suddenly – Nigel did.

He grabbed Uriah's elbow and dragged him to a halt, too.

"Uriah," he breathed. "We have to give ourselves up. Running will just make things worse. And besides . . ."

Nigel glanced back at the security guard, who was gaining on them quickly. His mustachioed face was contorted with rage, and his right hand was resting on a black holster clipped to his belt.

"He has a gun!" Nigel added.

"So, stay here, idiot!" Uriah spat, wrenching his arm from Nigel's grip. Nigel winced as Uriah called him the very name he'd been repeating to himself ever since the monsters had crashed the boys' little museum tour.

Idiot. Idiotidiotidiot. I'm such an idiot.

Uriah grabbed Nigel's shoulders and glowered at him.

"Sure, stay here," he growled. "But know that if you say anything about the fact that *I* was here with you, you're going to end up broken! Destroyed! Is that clear?"

"I– I . . ."

Nigel couldn't answer. So Uriah merely gave Nigel one last sneer and headed for the open window. He reached it in a few quick strides and threw himself through it.

Nigel stayed put. He braced himself. Now

the security guard was going to grab him and arrest him while his friends escaped. Or . . . not! Suddenly, a powerful beam of light poured through the window, and a gruff voice outside yelled, "Freeze!"

Nigel edged over to the window and peeked through it. Several policemen were edging toward his former friends, waving flashlights and getting ready to draw their guns.

"You're caught, boys," said the lead officer. "I'm Sergeant Lair. We're taking you down to the station house so you can tell us all about your little adventure here tonight. No false moves, now . . ."

A half hour later, Nigel found himself in Sergeant Lair's office. The four of them – Nigel, Laurent, Kurt, and Uriah – were lined up on a bench like crime suspects.

Not *like* suspects, Nigel realised, placing a trembling hand on his forehead, which was damp with cold sweat. We *are* suspects.

And just as it happened on TV, the boys were being treated to the "good cop, bad cop" routine. Sergeant Lair was the so-called good cop, gazing at the boys with bemused disdain.

"Monsters, huh?" he said drily. "Well, if you really want to know . . ."

Nigel held his breath hopefully. He'd seen Sergeant Lair's daughter, Irma, around school. She was a total prankster – always ready with a story or a joke. Maybe she and her dad were cut from the same cloth!

"I don't believe a word of it," Sergeant Lair finished. He crossed his arms over his barrel chest. His grey-brown hair stuck up in aggravated tufts. Everything about his demeanour said, Don't mess with me, buddy!

Uriah, of course, didn't heed this signal in the slightest. While Nigel cringed, Uriah whined, "But it's the truth, mister! They were there!"

Now the museum security guard, who'd been quietly seething in the corner of Sergeant Lair's shabby office, lunged forward.

"Your joke has gone too far," he shouted at Uriah. "You terrified everyone who was in the museum this afternoon and got yourselves into the newspaper, which is probably just what you wanted." He was clearly the bad cop.

The guard's face went purple with disgust.

"Then you got greedy," he spat. "You tried

to stage a repeat performance. But things got out of control, didn't they?"

As he spoke, the guard reached behind the office desk and pulled out the sword Kurt had used to try to fend off the monsters. He also held up a painting – the fruit-filled still life. In its center, right through a rosy apricot, was an ugly, black gash.

"Hey, Frank . . ." Sergeant Lair said with a sardonic smile. "They already told you. It's the monsters who are guilty, not them!"

"Okay!" Nigel cried out, unable to contain himself any longer. "Maybe they weren't real monsters. But I can tell you for sure that we weren't alone in the museum!"

"*I'll* explain," Uriah piped up, giving Nigel an evil look. Nigel could almost see the rusty gears in Uriah's head turning, cooking up a big, fat lie for the police officers. In other words, Uriah was about to dig them an even deeper hole than the one they were already in. Luckily, the museum guard was having none of it.

"Save your breath, kid," he said. "We already heard your story. But Judge Cook, I'm sure, will be happy to listen."

With that, a crowd of adults began to parade into the room. The first was a woman

in a smart, blue suit. She must have been Judge Cook. Her blue-black hair was cut in a severe bob. She had a pretty face and soft eyes. But her mouth was hardened in a disapproving frown.

Behind her were . . . everybody's parents. Kurt's mum and dad looked as hapless and hopeless as their son did. Laurent's father had his meaty arm around his distressed wife. His bushy, blond mustache twitched angrily. Uriah's parents – both of them in suits so sharp they looked as though they could slice through paper – were flanking a man with glasses and a bulging briefcase.

And finally, there was Nigel's dad. Nigel took one look at his father's stunned, sad expression and hung his head in shame.

This is what I deserve, Nigel thought. I was so stupid. So . . . selfish. I'm just glad Mum isn't here, to see her son lined up like a criminal. She would be so disappointed.

In his brooding, Nigel was only vaguely aware of the adults' brisk proceedings.

"Are all the parents here?" Judge Cook asked. She tossed her trench coat over the back of a chair and stood behind Sergeant Lair's desk.

"Good evening, Judge," Uriah's mum said, stepping forward. She motioned with one skinny arm at the man standing next to her. "This is our lawyer. And he will tell you . . . my Uriah is innocent!"

Uriah's mum's voice grew shrill and angry.

"It was the bad influence of his friends that caused this," she shrieked. "They brought him into this scheme."

"Calm down," the lawyer whispered in the woman's ear. "Let me do the talking."

"No, sir," Judge Cook said firmly. "I will do the talking. Your little Uriah and his friends acted with complete irresponsibility tonight. It could have cost them a lot. But I don't want to put a permanent scar on anyone's record. After all, I have a daughter the same age as these boys. They actually attend the same school."

"So, are you saying they won't go to jail?" Kurt's mum asked hopefully.

"No," Judge Cook declared, folding her arms over her chest. "Luckily, the ruined painting was just a reproduction, on display while the original was being refurbished. And I've already talked to the museum director. He's agreed to a reduced charge against the boys."

Uriah's mum flashed a thin-lipped, triumphant smile.

"What a relief!" she declared.

"But," Judge Cook said, giving the four boys a pointed look. "They're not just going to get off with a slap on the wrist, either!"

The judge had other plans for the boys.

TWELVE

"Don't be afraid," Elias told the Guardians, as he led them up a flight of stairs. They'd just completed a walk through the town to a tall, cottage with a peaked roof some distance away from the noisy main square.

Oh, right, Taranee thought with a shuddery sigh. You might as well tell me not to breathe. I've basically been nothing *but* afraid since the day I moved to Heatherfield.

Of course, back then, Taranee's fears had been pretty humdrum. She'd quaked at the idea of being a newbie at school. She'd worried about finding her way around town. She'd kept forgetting her own phone number, and she'd wondered if she'd find new friends.

Taranee almost laughed at the idea. Her old fears, the fears of most teenage girls,

a luxury now. Today she had the fate of the world resting on her shoulders. And she was stuck inside a painting!

If Taranee only had use of her powers, she was sure she'd have felt better about this state of affairs. At first, being able to conjure fire in the palm of her hand had freaked Taranee out. She'd been sure she'd wake up one morning to find that she'd toasted her pillow like a giant marshmallow. Or worse!

But as it turned out, since she'd begun this whole Guardian thing, her fire power had gotten her out of several binds. In fact, she'd been able to rescue all her friends the last time Elyon had imprisoned them in floating bubbles in Metamoor.

Well, that was then, Taranee thought drily, and this is now. Elyon's trapped us *and* taken our powers away. We're stuck here like chickens in a coop.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Elias told the girls as he reached the top of the stairwell. One by one they emerged into a sunny art studio! Beneath the honey-coloured eaves of the slanted ceiling were dozens of canvases, a palette, and a can of still-wet brushes. The air smelled of sunshine and oil paint. Taranee –

who never felt more at home than in her dark-room, printing photographs – was surprised to realise that she *did* find the room comfortable.

She glanced at some of the canvases. None of them looked quite finished. They all had a pale, washed-out quality.

Elias must just be at the beginning of the process, she thought. She knew oil painting was all about piling on coat after coat of colour, creating depth and light with every layer.

"I live here," Elias said, pulling off his cloak and smiling a bit sheepishly at his guests. He rubbed his slender hands together nervously. "It's not very grand, but I like it. There's an excellent view of the cathedral from this loft."

"So, you're a painter," Will said, smiling as she looked around the room.

"A painter," Elias said quietly. "If you want to call it that."

Slowly, Elias crossed the loft to a canvas propped up on an easel. A lavender cloth was draped over the painting. Gritting his teeth, Elias pulled the cloth away. Taranee leaned in for a closer look at the canvas.

Just like Elias's other paintings, this work

seemed thin and hollow. The figure – a woman in an old-fashioned gown – was as shadowy as a wraith. The features of her face seemed to have been smudged away. Her fingers, folded on top of her billowing skirt, were indistinct. And the rolling hills that could be seen through a window behind her looked like nothing more than faint, green brushstrokes.

"This is all I am capable of now," Elias told the girls bitterly. "Shadows. Incomplete figures. Without my colours, I'm useless."

"But, you *do* have paint here," Cornelia noted, pointing at a few small pots of pigment next to the palette. "It's not enough?"

Elias sighed and again placed the cloth over his nonpainting.

"These works are nothing but illusions," he said bitterly. As he spoke, he kept his back to the girls. "Nothing that surrounds us really exists. That's the curse of Phobos."

Elias spun around to face the girls. His eyes looked feverish, and his lips were pale with anger.

"And now, that curse has struck you, too," he said. "What did *you* do to deserve this punishment? Did you dare to look at him? Did you approach his house?"

"Well . . ." Hay Lin said, shooting her comrades a sidelong glance. "It's sort of a long story."

Irma rolled her eyes and stepped forward.

"I'll explain it to you," she said bluntly. "We have to save the world. But Phobos and his sister don't want us to. And that's basically it."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Cornelia said.

"Hey, I'm no poet," Irma said with a shrug. "So, sue me! I just tell it like it is."

Taranee stifled a giggle. Irma, with her cut-and-dried style, had stripped their mission of all its drama. *And* its glory.

And for diva Cornelia, Taranee thought, that just won't do!

Shooting the bickering girls a look, Will smiled at Elias.

"Actually, that's not totally it," she admitted. "We're representatives of Candracar."

"Oh!" Elias blurted out. He was looking at the girls the same way all the townspeople had looked at *him* – as if they were magical beings. "You're the legendary Guardians of the Veil! In Metamoor, your name is whispered in fear."

Elias gave the girls an appraising look. Suddenly, Taranee felt a little self-conscious

about her striped tights, her turquoise wristbands, and her bouncy fronds of hair.

"For soldiers who have to save the world," Elias said carefully, "you look quite young."

"We are," Taranee admitted with a shrug. She was usually tongue-tied around grown-ups. For some reason, though, she felt comfortable being candid with Elias. "We just got our powers recently, actually."

"Powers that have gone kaput," Irma complained. She strolled over to one of the loft's tall windows, which were thrown open to let in the sweet-smelling spring breezes. "In this painting, air, water, fire, earth – they're all beyond us," she said with a big sigh.

"Yes, you can't quite get a grip on anything here," Elias explained. "You'll soon realise that you feel no hunger and no thirst. You never get sleepy. . . ."

"But," Hay Lin interrupted, "how do you know all these things? Who are you, sir?"

"I would have thought you would have figured that out by now," Elias said. He placed a mournful hand over his heart. "I'm the one who painted all this. I'm Elias Van Dahl, official portraitist of the court of Metamoor.

"At least, I was," Elias added darkly. "Until

Phobos wanted me gone."

Taranee took a sudden step forward. She wanted to put a sympathetic hand on Elias's shoulder. He looked heartbroken!

It was clear, however, that any comfort Taranee and her friends could offer this thin, tortured man would fall on deaf ears. His wan eyes grew vacant as he motioned for the Guardians to sit. They lowered themselves onto cushions and tarp-covered boxes nearby. They stared at Elias with wide eyes.

He began his story.

"For a long time," he said, "I worked for Metamoor's royal family. I painted the king and queen in their coronation robes. And when the royals disappeared, I painted dark abstractions – pictures of the kingdom's grief. Then Phobos ascended to the throne."

At the mention of the evil prince's name, Elias's slender fingers curled into fists. A vein began to pulse in his pale, high forehead.

"Life in Metamoor was never easy," he admitted. "But under Phobos's rule, it was close to impossible. He was obsessed with his own power. Nobody was good enough to look upon his beautiful face. In fact, he issued a proclamation, ordering that every image of

him be destroyed. The public squares and libraries of Metamoor were littered with shards of Phobos's statues and busts. Paintings were slashed. And Phobos shut himself up in his castle. The only connection he had with his people was through the murmurers – flower-like spirits who act as Phobos's eyes and ears.

"I was just a simple court painter," Elias continued with a shrug. "But the mere ability to capture Phobos's face – a face I knew well – made me one of his enemies. I was watched at all times. One night, I felt the presence of a giant man. Actually, a half-serpent, half-man. He followed me along my walk home, hissing threats at my back. He had a giant, blue creature with him."

Taranee exchanged a wide-eyed look with Will. They knew all too well who had stalked Elias in Metamoor – Cedric and his ever-present, cobalt-coloured henchman, Vathek.

That snaky jerk is *everywhere*, Taranee thought indignantly.

"The creatures meant to intimidate me," Elias said. "And it worked. I decided to leave Metamoor. I found a portal to another dimension – and another time. In fact, I made my

way to your world. I found a time period where artists like me were appreciated."

"When was that?" Taranee asked bluntly. "Last time I checked, modern people like their art tucked away in museums."

"The seventeenth century, in Europe," Elias answered matter-of-factly. "I created a new identity for myself – a new life."

As Elias reminisced, two spots of colour appeared on his pale, thin cheeks. His smile, for the first time since the Guardians ḥad met him, became easy and genuine. Taranee couldn't help returning the grin.

"I was free to paint," Elias continued with a sigh. "To dream and hope. Even . . . to love."

On that last word – love – Elias's voice grew thin. He brushed the surface of one of his shadowy canvases with his fingertips. Then he let his hand fall limply to his side.

It was then that Taranee realised something.

Every painting in the loft looked the same.

Washed-out and shadowy though the images were, Taranee could still make out the figure of one woman. She had honey-brown hair and a pink gown. Her smile was lilting and confident. Her eyes were perhaps hazel.

Or maybe they were green. The colours were too faint to tell.

But the love that Elias had poured into those works was all too vivid.

"For a very brief while," Elias said huskily, "life was sweet. But Phobos didn't forgive me for escaping. I was found by some of his henchmen – Lord Cedric and a couple of massive, blue-skinned ruffians. They surprised me in my studio, where I was painting my beloved Alexandra. His lackeys grabbed me. I can still remember Cedric's every word."

'Since you love your job so much, painter,' he said, 'it is inside one of your masterpieces that you will spend the rest of your existence!'

Of course, Cedric didn't banish me into Alexandra's portrait," Elias said with a rueful smile. "Her presence might have given me solace. Instead, he chose *The Never-Ending Spring*. The painting became a portal in the Veil. Cedric sent me through that portal, then closed the door forever. He returned to Metamoor, and I was left to languish here in this frivolous world I had created – a world that, thanks to evil magic, suddenly came alive."

Taranee gasped and Elias fell silent for a

moment. As her friends shook their heads in disbelief, Taranee craned her neck to glance out the window. She could see the townspeople milling about in the distant square. It was hard to believe they didn't really exist! Their lives played themselves out endlessly, as if on some cosmic treadmill. Meanwhile, they never experienced the pleasures of sleep, or a hot meal, or, simply, love.

Taranee gazed at Elias. Heartbreak had hollowed out his cheeks and stooped his slender shoulders.

I wonder, Taranee thought wistfully, if a boy could ever love me that completely.

Then another musing wormed its way into Taranee's mind: if, by some miracle, a boy *did* fall for her, would she be too shy, too fearful, to seize the opportunity? The thought caused a shiver of anxiety to rush through her. But then she shook her fear away. She had to focus.

Elias had resumed his story.

"This world is called *The Never-Ending Spring*," Elias pointed out, "but it really should be called *The Last Tear*. I had imagined a story behind the painting. This place was a happy village, where nobody had had reason to cry

for centuries. To remind them of their luck, its people put the last tear ever shed here in a glass vial and stored it in the center of their cathedral." His voice trailed off.

Elias plodded to the window and gazed out at the town. Taranee walked over to stand next to him.

"These people are not real." He gazed down at a couple of plump teenagers scurrying down a path in front of the house. "But they live a never-ending day."

"It's a nightmare," Taranee breathed.

"It's Phobos's evil," Elias said. His voice caught in his throat. "He's forced me to stay in this painting for . . . how long has it been? . . ."

"Four hundred years, Elias," Will said gently. "We come from the twenty-first century."

"Four hundred years," Elias gasped.

"You barely look your age," Irma piped up, trying in her own way to be helpful.

"Shut up, Irma," Cornelia hissed.

Hay Lin stumbled up to one of the paintings. She squinted at the woman's washed-out smile.

"And the woman in the painting?" she

asked Elias. "Alexandra?"

"I never got to say goodbye to her," Elias said. "And that is why I will never stop suffering. If only I could, at least, draw her. . . ."

Elias couldn't finish his sentence. He choked on the words, then hid his face in his thin hands. Taranee felt tears well up behind her own glasses. She sighed deeply. Elias's story was better than any romance novel. And worse, because it had really happened. The tragedy of it all was too much!

Will gave her friends a stricken look as Elias's shoulders heaved with silent sobs. When the artist finally regained his control, she stepped forward.

"Elias, we will help you to draw Alexandra," she said with determination. "I think I know how to give your colours the kick they need!"

"How?" Elias sputtered in disbelief.

"Well . . ." Will said, looking around her. Taranee tried to see the room through her friend's eyes. She saw a medieval house composed of nothing but paint and canvas. She saw five girls with wings sprouting from their backs. In short, she saw a scene that was nothing less than preposterous!

"I guess this is a silly question," Will said with a small laugh. "But do you believe in magic?"

THIRTEEN

Will and the other Guardians followed Elias across the town square. As they made their way through the throngs of revelers, the boisterous celebration stopped completely.

"Oooh!" one woman cried out, pointing at Will's wings with a fearful expression.

"There they are," a soldier said angrily.

Next to *him*, a stout man in a fuzzy, red beard glared disapprovingly at the Guardians' mod outfits.

"What impudence," he sniffed.

Wonderful, Will thought sarcastically. I always love being the center of attention.

Will became aware of her shoulders creeping up towards her ears. Her eyes widened, and her hands began to tremble. But then she glanced at her comrades.

Cornelia was glaring at the gawkers.

Hay Lin was greeting their scrutiny with a willfully oblivious, sunny smile.

Irma, of course, was smoothing her hair and giving the crowd movie-star smiles.

That's Irma, Will thought with a small smile. She craves the limelight as much as I loathe it.

But the real point was that none of her friends were making any apologies for being there in the painting. *They* knew they weren't the enemy. In fact, when all this was over, the Guardians might very well have saved the *Never-Ending Spring*ers from the drudgery of their incessant, sunny day!

So *there*, Will thought, sticking her chin out. She relaxed her shoulders and began to stalk behind Elias with confidence.

Elias, too, was putting on a jovial face.

"Cheer up, people," he called as his colourful crew made its way across the square. "These girls are our friends. They're here to help us."

Elias glanced over his shoulder at Will. His face clouded with a sudden wave of doubt.

"At least," he whispered, "that's what you've told me."

"Well, it's just an idea I have, Elias," Will said, in a shaky voice. Doubts of her own began creeping into her mind. She'd felt so certain about this solution in Elias's loft. But the real truth was, Will had *no* idea if her scheme would work.

And Irma wasn't helping with her two cents' worth: "Yeah, and your idea almost seems too absurd to work."

Will caught her breath and gave Irma a baleful glare. Oh, *what* was she doing?

"Listen, the first thing I noticed about this place was the stillness," Will declared, thinking out loud. As they walked, Elias and the Guardians cocked their heads to listen in. Will took a deep breath and pressed on.

"We are living in a moment that never goes by," Will explained. "So I say, let's try to change the rules. Let's face off with Phobos's spell and see what happens."

Elias looked skeptical.

"But how do you expect to do that when you don't have your powers?" he asked.

"We don't need powers for this," Will declared. "Sometimes, all you need is a little creativity."

Elias stopped in his tracks.

Okay, he *totally* hates the idea, Will thought desperately. Here's the part where he gets all snarly. Or, worse – patronising!

"Here we are," Elias said, setting his jaw with determination.

Oh. Elias had stopped because the group had reached its destination – the front steps of the majestic cathedral that loomed over the town square. Tentatively, the group walked up the stone steps and gazed up at the tall, arched, wooden doors.

"Up to now, you've used well water to mix your paints," Will pointed out to Elias.

"Yes," he nodded.

"But today, you'll use the tear stored in that vial," she declared. "A tear is a sign of sadness, yes, but also of humanity. Of a soul! Who knows – it might be just the thing to shake this town up!"

"Um," grunted Taranee, as she pushed hard on the church doors. The doors did not budge.

"The entrance is blocked," she gasped.

Naturally, Will thought with a sigh. This would be too easy if the church doors weren't locked, and we could walk right in.

But, Elias was determined!

"Hey," he called to a couple of burly men arm-wrestling nearby. "Come and help us push."

The men shrugged and lumbered to their feet. As they walked over, Elias turned to Will. His cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"A world without change," he said, "is a world without hope, wouldn't you say?"

"That's the point," Will eagerly agreed. "I mean, maybe nothing will happen. But why not try it?"

With a brisk nod, Elias lined up next to the musclemen. On the count of three, the guys crashed against the church doors with their shoulders.

The doors still didn't budge.

"Again!" Elias barked.

Thump!

"You can do it, fellas!" Irma squealed in delight, jumping up and down and pumping her fists in the air.

Thump! Crack!

The doors were starting to give! The men kept going. Before long, they had broken through.

"Success!" Hay Lin cried.

The group tumbled into the church, chat-

tering and giggling with excitement. But a moment later, they all fell silent.

Will looked up at the towering ceiling. It was beautifully gilded, with golden flying buttresses and frescoes of cherubs and angels. Ornate chandeliers held flickering candles. At the front of the church, a giant, round, stained-glass window showered the group with warm, rainbow-coloured beams.

"This is really remarkable," Irma whispered.

"Beautiful," Cornelia said, for once agreeing with Irma.

"I've always just drawn this church's exterior," Elias gasped as he stumbled down the cathedral's central aisle. "This is the first time I've seen the inside."

Will spotted an altar halfway up the aisle. It was the spot where an ordinary church would have stored a bath of holy water. Crossing her fingers, Will hurried up to the pedestal.

On top of it was a pink, silk pillow. And nesting in the pillow was a small, glass bottle plugged with a cork.

Gingerly, Will closed her fingers around the bottle. It felt dusty, but warm, as if life itself

had been sleeping within the tiny vial.

This *has* to work, Will thought. She almost sobbed as she handed the bottle to Elias.

"This must be the last tear," she said. "Take it, Elias. Take it, and use it to make your paints."

As Elias stared at the tiny bottle in wonderment, Will felt a surge of pride well up in her chest. She looked up at the cathedral's ceiling and flashed a defiant smile. She hoped Cedric could see them now. She could just imagine him, seething as they defied his spell and took steps to break free of his prison.

He'd be pacing around one of his cold, stony chambers, ranting to his witless blue flunky, Vathek.

"This is impossible," he'd say. "Those girls are putting my patience to the test."

"Is there *anything* that will work on them, Lord Cedric?" Vathek would respond, wringing his fat claws anxiously.

"*Nothing's* working," Cedric would complain. "Why is everything so complicated? Used to be, when people were cast out by a spell, they stayed in their corners, meekly and quietly, until the end of their days! These girls are just so arrogant!"

Will giggled under her breath. Thwarting that snaky Cedric was totally satisfying! She dipped back into her happy fantasy.

"It's true, master," Vathek was saying sympathetically to Cedric. "Do you want me to take care of them?"

In Will's imagination, Cedric stopped his pacing.

He turned to gaze at Vathek with revenge in his icy blue eyes. A tight smile stiffened his perfect face as he shook his head. And suddenly, Will felt a prickle of fear crawl up her neck.

"No, Vathek," Cedric hissed. "Somebody else is anxious to see the Guardians. He wants a final word with them!"

Will tried to shake the fantasy – now a creepy one – out of her mind. But when she returned to reality, she found it to be, if possible, even worse!

"Mr. Van Dahl," an eerily familiar voice roared. Will spun around, looking for the voice's source. It seemed to be reverberating off every stone surface in the giant cathedral!

"I wouldn't go anywhere with that vial if I were you," the voice said.

Then something began to happen in the

middle of the church aisle.

That something started as a slight warping of the air. Will's vision turned watery and wavery. No – it wasn't Will's eyes. It was the air!

A circle of silvery smoke began to appear in it. At first, the haze swirled lazily. Then, its movements accelerated. The circle began to widen. Before anyone had a chance to react, it was ten feet in diameter. Its edges crackled and roiled with evil magic.

It's – it's a portal! Will realised with a gasp.

Fwaaaammmm!

And that would be the all-too-familiar sound of somebody bursting *through* the portal, Will thought, letting out a small scream.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Yah!"

Suddenly, a menacing horseman – make that horse-monster! – burst through the smoky ring! His blue face was set into a predatory grin. His suit of armour clanked heavily. And his horse – which actually looked more like a swift-footed rhinoceros – blew angry jets of fiery, red steam from its nostrils.

"It's Frost the Hunter!" Will screamed.

The Guardians had run into this very evil Metamoorian dude before. They'd outwitted

him. So *now*, he was hopping mad.

Maybe I *didn't* imagine that conversation between Cedric and Vathek, Will thought shakily. This is terrible!

Suddenly, however, Will realised something: If Cedric really is watching, and if he thinks this situation is dire enough to send his strongest bounty hunter, then I *must* be onto something!

Will whirled around and grabbed Elias by the shoulders.

"This proves I was right," she cried. "Elias, we can do this! We can break that spell!"

"B– but– "

Elias's eyes bulged with terror. Frost's rhino was clomping around the group threateningly. But Will didn't have time for fear.

"Do as I tell you!" she barked at the man. "Run home and mix your paints with that tear!"

Before Elias could answer, and before Will could think twice about what she was doing, she shoved Elias roughly from their midst. He missed being gored by the rhino's horn by only a few inches – but he made it.

Irma waved Elias out of the cathedral.

"Go, now!" she urged him. "We'll deal with Frost."

Elias darted out into the street. Frost let him. It was the Guardians he was after.

A fact that Cornelia found just a *bit* irksome.

"Nice, Irma," she hissed at her friend. "And *how* exactly do you think we'll deal with that beast?"

"See, that's your problem, Cornelia," Irma retorted. "You're so type A. You always have to have a *plan*! *Bo*-ring. I say we wing it."

"Not that we have much choice," Will said nervously.

Meanwhile, Frost had a plan of his own. He'd pulled his steed to a halt in front of the last tear's now empty altar. Behind him, the brilliant, stained-glass window looked like a heavenly halo.

Now *that's* a cruel joke, Will thought. But she refused to be cowed. She linked arms with her friends. Together, they glared at the villain.

"I'll be taking care of your painter friend later," Frost informed them. "Now I'm ready for you, Guardians. You've already escaped me once. But that will *never* happen again."

"I hate to contradict you," Hay Lin said chirpily. "But the door is that way!"

Hay Lin pointed behind her. Then she

grinned at her girlfriends. En masse, they spun around and began to race away from Frost.

"No!" the hunter roared.

Ta-dooom! Ta-dooom! Ta-dooom!

That was the rhino's giant hooves, thundering after the girls. As Will sprinted down the aisle, she eyed the open doorway. It looked as though it were about ten feet tall.

Let's just hope this works, Will thought desperately.

To her friends, she said, "Keep going! Let him follow us!"

"Let him follow us!?" Cornelia sputtered as she sped along next to Will. "Have you *seen* that thing he's riding? He'll catch up to us in about five seconds."

"Maybe not," Will grunted.

At that moment, the five girls plunged through the doorway. They careened down the steps and darted into the square. Only then did Will allow herself to look back at their pursuer.

Whammmm!

Will saw the rhinosteed gallop through the doorway. But Frost remained in the cathedral. More specifically, he was sprawled on the cathedral *floor*, groaning. Will's calculations

had been correct. Atop his giant rhinosteed, Frost's head definitely rose ten feet into the air. As the steed slipped through the doors, Frost had banged into the doorjamb with all the force of a battering ram.

"He was too busy chasing us down to remember to duck!" Will said with a cackle. The girls watched as Frost rubbed his head and moaned woozily.

"He took himself out!" Taranee cried. "We didn't have to do anything."

"I didn't lie, did I, Frost?" Hay Lin yelled in triumph at the big, blue bully.

"Grrrrr!" the hunter roared, as he lolled weakly on the ground. "This is gonna cost you, Guardians."

Splatttt!

An answer came in the form of a rotten orange. The fruit hit Frost square in the face!

"Irma!" Will cried accusingly. "Was that really necessary?"

"But . . . it wasn't me!" Irma protested.

"No," said a voice from somewhere behind the Guardians. "It was us!"

The girls turned to see a couple of soldiers, *and* a host of townspeople, stalking towards them through the square.

"Listen, knight," the soldier spat at Frost. "Aren't you a little old to be chasing down five young girls?"

"We don't want any trouble in our village," a brash young man declared from behind the soldier. "Why don't you go away?"

"You don't know who you're talking to," Frost grunted, lurching to his feet. Weakly, he pulled a giant sword from its sheath on his belt. "Don't go against me."

"*Maybe* you didn't understand us," the soldier yelled. "We've asked you nicely to hit the road. But if you want to do this the hard way, you need only say the word."

"It works! It *works*!"

Uh, *that's* not the word I was expecting, Will thought. She peered into the crowd for the source of the joyful outburst. Suddenly, Elias broke through the throng. He was grinning madly and waving a small scrap of canvas.

"The tear did the trick!" Elias cried. He thrust the canvas scrap at Will. The paint on the cloth was still wet, but Will could see that it was also dancing with colour. The reds were vivid, the yellows, warm and nuanced. "I can paint!" Elias crowed.

Elias's joy was infectious. Will waved his picture in the air and jumped for joy. As she did, she detected an extra spring in her step.

Her arms, too, seemed more powerful.

If the tear broke the spell, she suddenly realised, then that means our powers are back!

Will closed her eyes and clenched her right fist. Almost immediately, she began to feel surges of pink magic move through her veins. The power traveled up her arm, then tunneled into her heart, her muscles, her mind.

When she opened her eyes, the Heart of Candracar – glowing and pulsing as brightly as ever – was hovering over her open palm.

"Air!" Will cried, tossing a silver teardrop of magic over to Hay Lin.

"Earth!"

Will sent a pulse of green power to Cornelia.

"Water! Fire!"

Irma and Taranee were infused with their magic, too. Hay Lin threw her arms into the air and conjured up a great gust of wind. Irma began redirecting the spray of the town square's fountain. The great gush of water headed directly for Frost.

Taranee bounced a ball of fire in her palm threateningly. And Cornelia stomped on the ground, creating a crackling fissure that began to make its way toward the increasingly cowed blue thug.

"Oh, no!" Frost cried out in panic as he watched the Guardians spring into action.

Oh . . . yeah! Will rejoiced silently. We've triumphed!

And it wasn't, she suddenly realised, just because of the Guardians' magic. She and her friends had survived this latest battle by bonding together and trusting their wits.

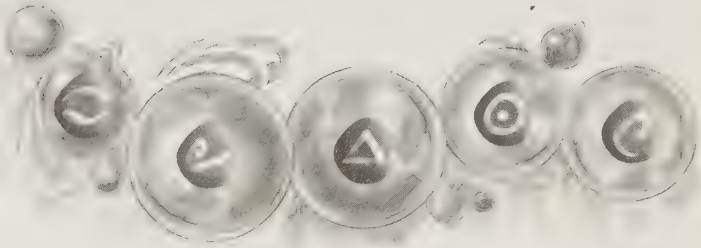
They were coming into their own.

And when the next battle arrives, Will thought, with fierce determination, we will be ready!

Witch

Will Irma Taranee Cornelia Hay Lin

Illusions and Lies



Adapted by ELIZABETH LENHARD

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

IN THE CITY OF MERIDIAN, LORD CEDRIC TREMBLES AS HE REPORTS TO THE COURT OF PHOBOS...
I BEG YOUR FORGIVENESS, GENTLE AND KIND COURT OF THE WHISPERERS!
ONCE AGAIN I WAS OVERPOWERED BY THE POWER OF THE FIVE GUARDIANS OF THE VEIL....
EVEN CAPTURING ONE OF THEM – TARANEE – DID NOT HELP ME. THE GUARDIANS ENTERED MERIDIAN AND FREED HER...*
* See W.I.t.c.h. #3 and #4.
OUR PEOPLE HAVE SEEN THE EARTHLY BEINGS! A GROUP OF TRAITORS ARE NOW LOOKING FOR A PORTAL THROUGH THE VEIL!
THEY WANT THE PROMISED LAND! WHO ARE WE TO DENY THEM?

IT'S PRINCE PHOBOS HIMSELF!
YES! I DON'T USE THE WHISPERERS WHEN I AM SPEAKING WITH HONOURED OFFICIALS!
DO THE INHABITANTS OF MERIDIAN REALLY WANT TO REACH EARTH? THEN IT IS UP TO YOU TO HELP THEM!
WHAT? WHY?
DO YOU NOT TRUST THAT I HAVE A PLAN?
AAAH! N – NO! PLEASE FORGIVE ME, PRINCE!
HHAATZz
USE A SPY. HE MUST CONVINCE THE FUGITIVES THAT THE GUARDIANS ARE HOSTILE AND DANGEROUS!
IT IS UP TO YOU TO OPEN THE PORTAL FOR THE FUGITIVES, WEAKENING THE POWER OF THE GUARDIANS!
I'LL DO IT!
GOOD! LET'S CREATE A SPLIT IN THE VEIL, AND LET'S MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO FIX!

ON EARTH, SOME TIME LATER, IN THE HEATHERFIELD SPORTS CENTER . . .
COME ON, WILL! TWO MORE STROKES.
YEEESSS!
FRUUUSH!
GREAT TIME! GOOD JOB, WILL!
THANKS, VERA! BUT WITHOUT YOUR HELP, I WOULD NEVER HAVE DONE IT.
EVER SINCE YOU STARTED TRAINING ME, I'VE BEEN IN GREAT SHAPE. DO YOU REALLY HAVE TO GO AWAY?
I'M ONLY FILLING IN FOR THE HEAD TRAINER, WHO IS COMING BACK SOON. BUT LET'S FOCUS ON YOU RIGHT NOW, OKAY?
I SIGNED YOU UP FOR THE SCHOOL CHAMPIONSHIPS THAT ARE TAKING PLACE HERE.
ARE YOU SERIOUS?

OF COURSE I'M SERIOUS. I ALREADY MENTIONED YOUR NAME TO THE DIRECTORS OF THE SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE.
THAT'S FANTASTIC!
IF YOU ARE CHOSEN, YOU WILL HAVE TO TRAIN EVERY DAY. I NEED TO GET YOUR MOTHER'S PERMISSION.
NO PROBLEM! I'LL TALK TO HER ABOUT IT TONIGHT, AT DINNER.
WOW! I CAN'T BELIEVE I WAS ABLE TO ACHIEVE MY GOAL, WITHOUT USING MY POWERS.
FINALLY, I CAN SHOW THEM HOW GOOD I AM. MUM WILL BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT IT!
BUT, ON THE CONTRARY . . .
MY ANSWER IS NO!
WHAT?
YOU HEARD ME! NOW, HELP ME CLEAR THE TABLE.

I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND! WHY?
YOU CAN'T WASTE TIME TRAINING! YOU HAVE TO STUDY. YOUR GRADES ARE TOO LOW.
WHO TOLD YOU THAT? IT WAS COLLINS, WASN'T IT? THAT . . .
WATCH WHAT YOU SAY! YOUR HISTORY TEACHER IS ALSO MY GOOD FRIEND.
HE NOT ONLY MORTIFIED ME IN FRONT OF MY FRIENDS, BUT NOW HE IS SPYING ON ME!
STOP IT!
I COULD HAVE RAISED MY GRADE BEFORE THE COMPETITION, BUT YOU'VE ALREADY DRAWN YOUR CONCLUSIONS.
SLAM

THE NEXT MORNING, IN FRONT OF THE SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE...
WHY? WHY?
WHY DID I HAVE TO TELL THE BIOLOGY TEACHER THAT I LIKE PHOTOGRAPHY?
"THAT'S WONDERFUL, TARANEE! TAKE A PHOTO OF THREE BUGS AND MAKE A CONNECTION, DARLING!"
THERE'S JUST ONE PROBLEM: BUGS DISGUST ME!
AND THEY LOOK EVEN BIGGER WITH A ZOOM LENS!
A BUTTERFLY! MY SAVIOR!
STOP JUST A MINUTE, BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLY. STOP! STOP A LITTLE, DON'T MOVE YOUR LITTLE WINGS...
FRUSH

THEY MIGHT ACTUALLY SUCCEED IN CLOSING THE PORTAL.
I MUST STOP THEM. THE INVASION ONLY JUST STARTED!
WHERE ARE YOU GOING? THEY WILL SEE YOU AND . . .
LOOK, BROTHERS!
IT'S THE SERVANT OF PHOBOS! CATCH HIM!
HUH? WHAT ARE THEY DOING? ARE THEY AGAINST CEDRIC?
NOT AGAINST HIM, BUT AGAINST ALL THAT HE REPRESENTS!
"YEARS OF LIES! OF POVERTY!"
LET GO OF ME! IN THE NAME OF YOUR KING!
"OF SUFFERING!"
NOW, YOU'LL GET WHAT YOU DESERVE! IN THE NAME OF MERIDIAN!

SHAA
NO!
WILL!
BUT WHAT . . .
IT'S A MIRACLE!
SHE'S STILL ALIVE!

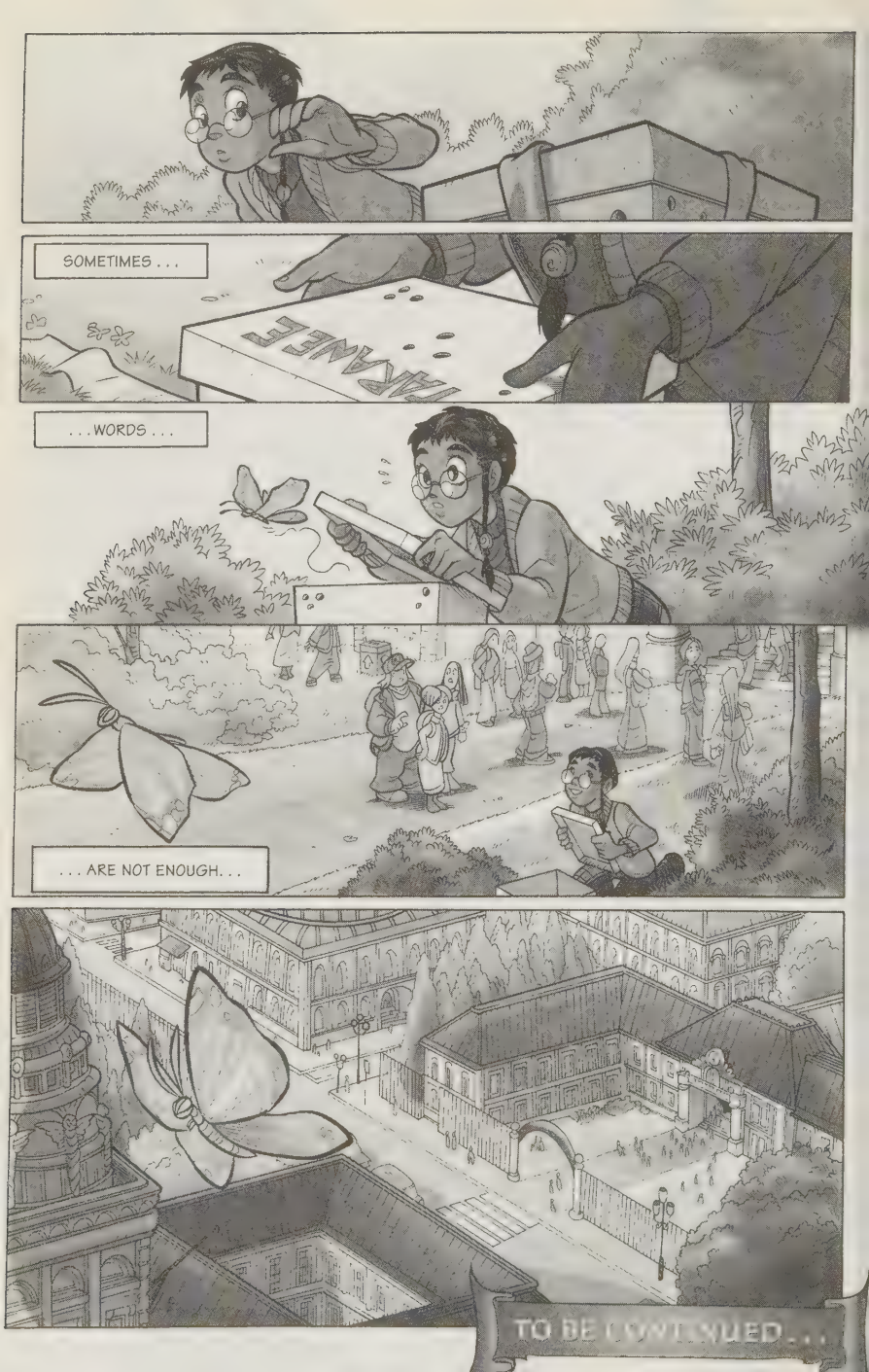
NO!
THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS!
I KNOW!
YOU . . . WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT OUR CONDITION?
I KNOW THAT YOUR HEARTS ARE CLOUDED. YOUR DREAMS ARE BLOCKED.
I KNOW YOU ARE A PROUD PEOPLE WHO NEED RESPECT! WHO LOVE LIFE!
AND I ALSO KNOW THAT SOON, YOUR WORLD WILL CHANGE. AND YOU WILL CHANGE WITH IT!
YES! IT WILL CHANGE! WHEN YOU ARE DESTROYED!
?

GET OUT OF THE WAY, VATHEK! SHE AND HER FRIENDS WILL CLOSE THE PORTAL AGAIN!
KEEP HER AWAY! THIS IS THE ONLY WAY YOU'LL GAIN FREEDOM! A NEW WORLD WHERE . . .
IT'S USELESS. THEY WON'T DO IT!
THEY WILL COME BACK WITH ME TO THEIR . . . TO OUR WORLD!
DO I NEED TO REMIND YOU WHO'S IN CHARGE, YOU BIG BEAST? DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE TALKING TO?
. . . AND I'VE DECIDED TO CHANGE IT! LET'S GO, BROTHERS!
TRAITOR! PHOBOS HIMSELF WILL MAKE YOU REGRET YOUR DECISION!
DO YOU WANT TO ELIMINATE THE ONLY PERSON WHO HAS STOOD BY YOU ALL YOUR MISERABLE LIFE?
WHAT'S GOING ON? WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU, VATHEK?
A LITTLE MIRACLE! I'VE SEEN TOO MUCH DARKNESS. . .
I'LL WAIT FOR HIM WITH OPEN ARMS, IN THE DEPTHS OF MERIDIAN!

KWAAM
CEDRIC!
TAKE ME AWAY, ELYON! YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE I HAVE LEFT. . .
. . . ONLY YOU . . .
THAT WAS INCREDIBLE! FANTASTIC!
THOSE WORDS! HOW DID YOU KNOW WHAT TO SAY?
I – I DON'T KNOW! IT JUST CAME OUT OF MY MOUTH! AS IF I WAS SPEAKING FOR. . .
. . . SOMEONE ELSE . . .

SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE. THE NEXT MORNING . . .
CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?
IT IS A STORY OF BETRAYAL – AND INTRIGUE!
YES! BUT THIS CANNOT BE A REAL GRADE!
IT'S TOO HIGH! IT JUST DOESN'T EXIST IN RELATION TO SCHOOL GRADES!
YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS! MR. COLLINS SAID MY REPORT WAS VERY REALISTIC!
ARE YOU SAYING THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE CHANGED YOUR OPINION OF HIM?
I WOULDN'T GO THAT FAR! LET'S JUST SAY HE GAINED A FEW POINTS!
WILL I HAVE TO TELL YOU SOMETHING!
CORNELIA, I . . .
PLEASE LET ME SPEAK!
I WANT TO TRY TO EXPLAIN HOW I FEEL! EVEN IF SOMETIMES WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH . . .
THE HEART OF CANDRACAR WAS LEFT TO YOU FOR A REASON! AND I DIDN'T DISCOVER IT UNTIL LAST NIGHT!

OH, GIRLS, WHAT A TOUCHING MOMENT! HEY, WHERE'S TARANEE?
SHE'S TRYING TO TAKE PICTURES OF SOME BLACK BEETLES, FOR BIOLOGY!
A GRASSHOPPER! IT WENT TOWARD THAT BUSH. MAYBE IT'S A MEETING PLACE FOR INSECTS.
AND THIS IS WHERE URIAH AND HIS GANG MADE MY OTHER BUTTERFLY . . . HISTORY!
. . . A BOX FOR ME?
TINY KNEE
NIGEL!
NIGEL! HURRY UP!
YES, URIAH. I'M COMING!


SOMETIMES . . .
. . . WORDS . . .
. . . ARE NOT ENOUGH. . .
TO BE CONTINUED . . .

ONE

Taranee Cook groaned as she crept across the lawn on her hands and knees. She just *knew* she was getting grass stains on her favourite purple jeans. What's more, her round glasses kept slipping down her nose, and the beaded ends of her long braids trailed in the dirt.

I would give anything to abandon this mission, Taranee thought with a sigh. If only I could!

And what is my mission? Taranee thought, flicking a ticklish blade of grass away from her nose. Conjuring up a fireball in the palm of my hand, perhaps, to toss at some slimy, blue monster? Or using my magic to close a gateway between earth and a faraway, evil universe? Maybe I have to escape the clutches of Elyon,

a girl who used to be my friend, but is now this otherworldly princess of darkness.

Or maybe, Taranee thought with a rueful laugh, I simply have to save the world.

It could have been any of the above. Not too long ago, Taranee had been transformed from an ordinary girl – your average shutterbug and shy new student at the Sheffield Institute – into a Guardian of the Veil.

This Veil was not bridal nor made of lace. This Veil was made of bigger stuff. In fact, it covered the entire world! It was a cosmic barrier that separated earth – otherwise known as home of the good guys – from Metamoor, an unknown, primitive land populated by reptilian creatures. Many of the creatures looked like massive lizards, albeit ones who dressed in suede tunics. Others were blue giants with craggy, rocklike horns upon their heads. Still others had red eyes, dreadlocks, and stolid bodies clad in rhinoesque armour.

It's like a bad horror movie, right? Taranee asked herself with an incredulous, dry laugh.

Not really. Many of those creatures were as kind and caring as any human. They cooked meals, raised their kids, and built thatched-

roof homes, like any other old-fashioned townspeople. The only difference between them and the residents of Heatherfield – the hip, seaside city where Taranee lived – was in their form of government.

Make that *dictatorship*.

A cloud of oppression kept Metamoor in gloomy shadows. The person responsible for that state of affairs was a brutal prince named Phobos – a young man so vain only a select few were allowed to gaze upon his face.

With nobody to rein his evil self in, Phobos used Metamoor for his own pleasure. He hoarded all the planet's natural resources to create an Eden for himself. He left his people to toil in hardscrabble villages. He stole not only their sunshine but their hope.

And was that enough? Not even. Phobos and his evil minions also wanted a piece of earth.

Boy, Taranee thought as she shifted her position on the grass. If I thought Metamoor was hard to conceive of, Candracar is positively preposterous.

Candracar existed "in the middle of infinity." Taranee's image of it was filled with clouds,

looming temples, and beatific specters in gossamer cloaks. But that was all speculation. Taranee had never been to Candracar. It was as fantastic to her as fairyland.

The Veil was proof that hope existed. Someone in Candracar had created the Veil. And for centuries, it had kept Metamoorians away from earth, and vice versa. Nobody could stop the dawning of the millennium. When the year 2000 struck, the Veil had weakened. Twelve fissures had opened in the barrier. Eventually, those cracks had become portals, which were sort of cosmic superhighways between earth and Metamoor.

Taranee shuddered at the thought of those strange tunnels running from one galaxy to the next. She had traveled through a couple of portals and, each time, it had been an exceedingly rough ride!

The problem was, Taranee wasn't the only one traveling by portal. Some of Phobos's followers had been using them, too – to try to invade earth.

That was why Taranee had been anointed with magical powers. She had been given the role of fire starter, able to whip up flames,

redirect a rocket, or quell a forest fire, all with little more than mere determination.

Taranee's best friends had been brought on board, too. Irma was all about water, and Hay Lin was all things air. Cornelia controlled the earth, and Will was their leader, the keeper of the glowy orb called the Heart of Candracar. Whenever she unleashed the glass pendant's powers, the girls were transformed into beautiful, knowing, young women – complete with mod, winged, purple-and-turquoise outfits. Their club even had a cool title: the names Will, Irma, Taranee, Cornelia, and Hay Lin, spelled W.i.t.c.h.

Some parts of being a Guardian, Taranee had to admit, were fun.

I mean, she thought with a shrug, at first I was freaked about being, well, magical. But soon, I realised conjuring fire was kinda . . . cool!

Of course, with magic powers came magic responsibilities – daunting ones, at that.

Their job as members of W.i.t.c.h. was to close every portal that had erupted between earth and Metamoor. And with monsters constantly breaking through those openings, the task wasn't always that easy!

To add insult to injury, the girls' former friend, Elyon, had been swayed into defecting to Metamoor. A cute-boy-turned-snaky-Metamoorian named Cedric had told Elyon she was Phobos' sister. According to Cedric's story, the infant Elyon had been snatched away from Metamoor to be raised as a humble human child on earth. Elyon had been filled with rage when she discovered how many years of royal treatment had been denied her. She'd tried to get her friends to cross over to Metamoor's dark side with her, and, when they had refused, she had become their enemy. In fact, it seemed she was there, to sabotage their mission every time the Guardians turned around.

Just the thought of it made Taranee's narrow shoulders sag with weariness. But as she inched farther along on the lawn, she realised that, at that moment at least, she had nothing to worry about.

There's no way, she thought with a shrug, that Elyon would care at all about my current mission.

Because, at the moment, Taranee *wasn't* closing a portal or saving the world.

No, she was crawling across the grass in front of her school doing a homework assignment – and an especially gross one at that!

"Why, why, why," she muttered, "did I have to go and tell my biology teacher that I love photography?"

She lapsed into the breathy, nasal voice of her teacher. "'Good, Taranee,'" she mimicked. "'Take pictures of three bugs and write a report, dear.'"

"Ugh," Taranee shuddered, speaking now in her own voice – which was throaty and always on the quiet side. "There's only one little problem with this assignment. Bugs totally freak me out!"

Clenching her teeth in disgust, Taranee uncapped her camera lens and lifted the camera to her bespectacled eye. She slowly scanned the lawn. The blades of grass were as big as elephant ears by now. And, sure enough, nestled among them, she discovered a gro-tesque beetle. Its antennae quivered and danced in the brisk morning breeze.

"Ewww!" Taranee squealed, lowering the camera quickly. "I think it's time to ditch the zoom lens!" Bugs weren't meant to be big.

She unscrewed the lens – a fabulous gadget that her dad had given her for her last birthday. The gift had been a no-brainer for her psychologist dad. He was all about self expression, and he jumped at every opportunity to draw Taranee out of her shell, especially since the Cook family had moved to Heatherfield only recently. His thinking: what's a better ice-breaker than shooting a close-up of someone?

The thought made Taranee smile. She should tell her dad she'd been doing just fine in the friendship department, even without her camera. She and Will had become soul mates even before they found out they were destined to save the world together. And she felt a real connection with the other Guardians, too. That part surprised her. Will was shy like her, but the other girls weren't, in the slightest.

After all, we're as different as, well, earth, water, wind, and fire, Taranee thought, with a little giggle. Irma's this bouncy flirt who's more at home at the mall than in any maths class. Cornelia's tall, elegant, and completely poised. Meanwhile, Hay Lin's a tiny little thing who'd be bouncing off the walls even if she

didn't have jet-puffs of air on her side.

But somehow, Taranee mused, we all seem to fit together. We're a team.

Now, she thought, as she fitted a less . . . bug-eyed lens onto her camera, if only I could get my friends to help me with this assignment!

Curling her lip in disgust, Taranee gazed through the viewfinder again. And once again, she gasped. But this time, it wasn't in disgust! She'd somehow homed right in on the only *non*gross bug nature had to offer – a butterfly! It was perched on a blade of grass, its iridescent blue wings fluttering lazily.

"My saviour!" Taranee whispered with a grin. She inched forward on her elbows to get a better angle.

"Stop just a minute, pretty little thing," Taranee murmured as she twisted her lens for a better focus. She almost had the perfect shot!

"Stop," Taranee crooned again to the delicate insect. "Don't move your wings and . . ."

Taranee's finger was just closing on the shutter when suddenly, the butterfly flitted away in fright! In its place, a big, dirty, red

object landed in the grass with a rude *whomp*.

Through her camera, Taranee now found herself staring at a very floppy, and very stinky, red high top. It was the kind of decrepit sneaker that could only belong to . . . a boy.

Taranee scowled and looked up. First she saw a saggy, dark sock. Then a pair of knobby knees and some baggy, brown shorts. Finally, she found herself gazing at the thin-lipped sneer of . . .

"Uriah!" Taranee cried.

Ugh, she thought. If it's not blue monsters popping out of portals, it's that needle-nosed Uriah.

Uriah was the king of the Outfielders – the burnouts and brutes that lurked on the fringes of the Sheffield Institute's social order. They were bullies who found every opportunity to dis the popular kids and the science geeks alike.

Uriah was an Outfielder extraordinaire – the equal-opportunity abuser type. He tortured Infielders, jocks, small animals . . . even his own loyal gang members! Taranee had spied on Uriah and seen him leading his gang around like a prison guard. The big brute Laurent, with his

buzz-cut hair, and potbellied Kurt seemed only too happy to be Uriah's yes-men. It was pathetic.

But Nigel, the fourth member of Uriah's gang, seemed different. He didn't sport anything like Uriah's greasy zits or Kurt and Laurent's dopey attitudes. In fact, the last time Taranee had peeked at Nigel, he'd looked practically perfect. His silky, brown hair fell in casual waves to his chin, which was strong and scruffiness-free.

What really got to Taranee were Nigel's brown eyes. They were as soft and sad as an abandoned puppy's.

And with good reason, Taranee thought, as she glared up at Uriah. The whole gang had recently gotten into major trouble.

It had all started when Irma had gone to the Heatherfield Museum. As often happened when Irma hit the town, the gregarious girl ran into someone she knew. But this time it was no friendly acquaintance. It was a lizard from Metamoor! It turned out that the museum was home to a portal!

While the Guardians were busy dealing with the Veil's latest fissure, word had gotten out about the strange creature at the museum.

Uriah had been as drawn to the rumour as a rat is to cheese. He'd goaded his gang into breaking into the museum in the middle of the night for a little monster hunt.

Naturally, the guys had been snagged by security. They'd been brought to the police station, where they'd faced Judge Theresa Cook – otherwise known as Taranee's mother!

Taranee's mum had ordered the gang to do a year of community service in the very museum they'd infiltrated. Soon afterwards, Taranee had seen Nigel there, wearing the telltale orange jumpsuit of a kid doing time.

As Nigel had dusted sculptures and swept the museum floors, Taranee had caught his gaze from across a gallery full of paintings. She could still remember the sensation. All the beautiful artwork had melted from her peripheral vision. Nigel's ugly jumpsuit had faded into a blur, too. Taranee had seen only Nigel's brown eyes – eyes that were kind and pretty and . . . crinkled up in a shy smile. At her!

Now, here on Sheffield's front lawn, those eyes were focused on her again. Nigel had arrived on the scene with Kurt and Laurent, right after Uriah. But this time, Nigel wasn't

smiling.

When Uriah shoved his oily face into Taranee's – totally blocking her view of cute Nigel – she realised why her crush looked so stricken. Uriah hadn't just stumbled upon Taranee. No – she was his target!

"Look who's here," Uriah growled. "The judge's daughter."

Normally, that would have been the moment when Taranee melted into a puddle. Confrontation had never been her bag. What could she say? Battling the forces of evil with immense stores of her own magic had boosted her confidence.

So instead of caving, she merely glared at Uriah and demanded, "What do you want?"

"Only to tell you that, thanks to your mother, we'll be spending the next year in that stupid museum," Uriah snarled. "Cleaning galleries, dusting artwork, and doing other ridiculous chores."

While Taranee responded with a scornful smirk, Nigel stepped forward and placed a placating hand on Uriah's arm.

"C'mon, dude," he said, haltingly. "Kids

are starting to show up."

"Shut up, Nigel," Uriah spat, without releasing Taranee from his glare. When she glared back, unintimidated, Uriah reached out and cupped her chin in his rough fingers. Taranee held her breath.

"I only want this little girl to understand who she's dealing with," Uriah continued. "After all, her family has just arrived in town. She might not get – "

"There are tons of people on the stairs!" Nigel said with alarm.

The next thing Taranee knew, a familiar voice had invaded the space.

"Wassup, Taranee?"

Uriah jumped. His hands unclenched and fell to his sides. He replaced his threatening glare with a mere sneer. Then he turned around to see who had come to Taranee's rescue.

Imagine his surprise when the hero turned out to be a spindly Asian girl with long pigtails and goofy, purple goggles perched atop her head.

A girl, moreover, who was completely alone.

"Tons of people?" Uriah sputtered. He

glared accusingly at Nigel. "I see *one* little girl, you idiot."

Nigel shot Taranee a furtive glance. Then he shrugged at Uriah and said sullenly, "From here, it looked like more."

Taranee felt a burst of warmth fill her chest. Nigel had totally rescued her! He'd spotted Hay Lin and spoken up loudly enough to attract her attention. Then he had lied to Uriah to protect her. He was so romantic!

He was also, clearly, one of the good guys. Taranee just knew it. The only mystery was – what was he doing hanging out with these creeps?

There was no time to ask him.

"C'mon, boys," Uriah ordered his crew. "We'll continue this conversation another time."

The group shuffled off.

As Taranee gazed after them – well, after Nigel – she felt a small hand alight upon her shoulder.

"Everything all right, Taranee?" Hay Lin asked her. Her eyes, usually dancing with fun, were dark with concern. "Were they bothering

you?"

"It's all right, now," Taranee said with a grateful smile. It seemed that whenever she got into a bind these days – whether she was late to history class or kidnapped and imprisoned in dark Metamoor – her fellow Guardians popped up at her side. Taranee felt as though she could count on them for anything.

Well . . . *almost* anything.

"Those guys were just blowing off steam," Taranee said, turning from Hay Lin to watch the gang stomp away. Nigel was trailing behind them. In fact, he was stopping altogether. Taranee watched him take a deep breath, then brush a shock of glossy hair out of his eyes as he turned to peek backward.

He was looking for Taranee!

Once again, she caught the boy's shy gaze.

With her heart in her throat, Taranee wondered what to do. She knew what the *old* Taranee would have done. She'd have ducked behind the safety of her camera. Or quickly darted beneath a tree to stick her nose in a book. She would have flown away just like one of the skittish insects darting around the

lawn.

But now, things were different. She had fire in the palm of her hand. And she had her friend, Hay Lin, at her side.

So . . . Taranee shot Nigel a smile – not a big one, mind you – but broad enough to show, she hoped, that she was smitten.

Nigel returned her smile. Then he waved at her! Finally, regretfully, he turned to continue plodding after his crew.

Taranee closed her eyes for a moment. She felt as though she'd just swallowed a spoonful of honey, followed by a shot of espresso! Who knew you could feel so gooey and so hyped at the same time? Not to mention . . . wistful.

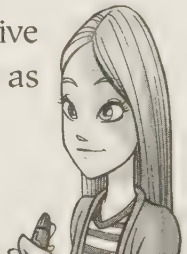
"Yeah," she sighed to Hay Lin, as Nigel headed off. "Everything's okay, except for one little problem. How will I find my butterfly again?"

TWO

Cornelia Hale folded her slender body in to her seat and pulled out her history book. When she'd opened the book to chapter seven and neatly pressed the pages into place, she looked around the classroom.

It was the usual A.M. scene. Sheffielders were dragging themselves into first-period class like prisoners showing up for assigned duty. Backpacks landed on the floor with dull thuds. Kids yawned widely. They popped breath mints into their mouths. And then they continued whatever gossip sessions they'd started on Sheffield's front lawn before the bell had rung.

Donny Lipsitz, always the last to arrive in class, took a final swig from his soda as



he stumbled into the room. Then he crushed the can and sprawled in his seat.

The only thing missing, Cornelia noticed with raised eyebrows, was Will. Donny Lipsitz had beat Will to class – and that wasn't a good sign.

Well, Cornelia thought drily, it looks like I'm discovering yet another side of Will – the rebellious *and* late teenager.

Ever since she'd met Will, Cornelia had had a hard time pinning her down. Her other friends were easier to peg – Irma was the prankster, always trying to push Cornelia's buttons. Taranee was the shy voice of reason, and Hay Lin was the peacemaker, who could smooth ruffled feathers. She did it with a grin and perhaps a temporary tattoo she'd draw with a Magic Marker on her friend's hand.

But Will . . . she was a different story. At first, she'd seemed like a poster child for low self-esteem. New to Heatherfield, with her parents' divorce weighing heavily on her, she'd stumbled into the Sheffield Institute looking pale and frightened. She'd been one big, raw nerve.

She certainly hadn't seemed like leader

material. Yet the Oracle of Candracar had made her the leader of W.i.t.c.h. – the Keeper of the Heart. As reluctant as Cornelia had been to defer to her little redheaded friend, Will had been just as ambivalent about guiding the group.

But lately, Will's nervousness had begun to melt away. In fact, the Heart of Candracar that hovered inside her body seemed to have infused her with strength and wisdom. Will's power had helped the whole group to get out of several deadly predicaments.

Though dubious, Cornelia had had to hand it to Will – perhaps she had what it took to lead their little save-the-world club.

Maybe she does, Cornelia thought as she uncapped her favourite pen. And maybe she doesn't. After all, Will has a habit of letting her emotions get in the way of her mission. Especially when that mission is making it to history class on time!

Cornelia knew Will's no-show wasn't about oversleeping or disciplining her crazy pet dormouse. No, it was all about their history teacher, Mr. Collins, otherwise known as Will's mother's new boyfriend!

Cornelia couldn't imagine having parents who were divorced or moving to a new city, much less having her mum date her teacher. She and her parents had lived in the same penthouse apartment all her life. Even though Lilian, Cornelia's little sister, was something of a brat, she, too, was part of Cornelia's family.

Then, Cornelia had sprouted wings and started making trees grow out of the earth on a whim, or carving holes in stone walls with a flick of her fingers. She'd even traveled through otherworldly wormholes to savage and distant planets.

And Cornelia had thought *puberty* was awkward! To say that her oh-so-placid life had hit a rough spot when she'd gone magical would be the understatement of the century.

It must be even worse for Will, Cornelia realised. Imagine, having to see your mum's boyfriend in class every morning – major mortification moment!

As if to fuel Cornelia's sympathetic thoughts, Mr. Collins walked into the classroom, just as the tardy bell rang. Cornelia peered past her mild-mannered teacher. Will was nowhere in sight!

To make matters worse, Mr. Collins wasn't looking nearly as mild-mannered as he usually did. In fact, his honey-coloured moustache was twitching viciously, and he had a cruel gleam in his eyes.

"Good morning, guys," Mr. Collins said, scanning the faces of the still-yawning students. As usual, the only acknowledgment any of the kids paid to their teacher's entrance was a downshift in their chattering. Instead of yelling across the aisles, they now huddled together and started whispering.

"Oh, get comfortable," Mr. Collins continued drily. "Don't get up on my behalf."

"Huh?" Donny Lipsitz grunted, looking around the classroom with lazy eyes. Then he slouched farther into his chair and planted his tattered black basketball shoes on his desk. "Who was getting up, Mr. Collins?"

"I was being sarcastic, Lipsitz," Mr. Collins spat. "Get your feet off your desk and tell me where Will Vandom is."

Cornelia felt a chill run through her. Will was in for it, now. Maybe she could try to run some type of interference.

"I know where she is!" Cornelia piped up.

She clicked and unclicked her pink pen-top nervously. "She . . . went to the bathroom. You weren't here for her to ask, so . . ."

"The fact that I'm late," Mr. Collins said, "doesn't justify her leaving without permission."

Mr. Collins sat at his desk and opened his textbook. His moustache twitched irritably again as he brusquely flipped through the book's pages. It looked as if he were suddenly unaccustomed to having that brushlike fuzz beneath his nose – even though Mr. Collins had had a moustache for as long as Cornelia could remember. It was his trademark.

Donny Lipsitz was completely oblivious, of course, to the fact that Mr. Collins was clearly in a *mood*.

"But, Mr. Collins," he said slowly. "If you're not here, who are we supposed to ask permission from?"

Mr. Collins didn't even glance up from his book. He merely jerked his thumb towards the classroom door.

"Principal Knickerbocker's office – now," he ordered Donny. "You know the way."

Heaving a huge sigh, Donny lurched out of

his chair and headed out the door, a confused look on his face.

You're in a bad mood today, aren't you? Donny mused when he got to the door. Okay, so we'll play that game.

With that, Donny ran a hand through his spiky brown hair and slumped through the door. The moment he disappeared out the door, another figure appeared – one with sullen, brown eyes and bony shoulders hunched up to the ends of her tousled, red bob.

Mr. Collins gave the girl a sarcastic smile.

"Will!" he announced with mock cheer. "Welcome back. It's a pleasure to see you."

Will cast her eyes downward and began to slump to her desk, next to Cornelia's. But as she passed Mr. Collins' desk, she stumbled. Her eyelids fluttered and she uttered a brief, soft moan.

Cornelia blinked in surprise. She knew Will was angsting about Mr. Collins and her mum, but going pale and faint was a bit dramatic, wasn't it?

Will quickly shook off her queasy feeling. She gave Mr. Collins a sidelong look, then

made her way to her desk. She carefully lowered herself into her chair and wiped away a layer of sweat that had formed on her upper lip.

"What's wrong, Will?" Cornelia whispered, leaning over to gaze at her friend with concern.

"Nothing," Will said, but her voice was filled with uncertainty. She glanced at Mr. Collins again. He was still turning the pages of his book, his moustache twitching away.

"When I passed by him," Will whispered to Cornelia, "I felt dizzy."

Cornelia shrugged.

"Maybe you didn't get enough sleep last night," Cornelia said. "Or you're hungry."

"No," Will said, giving Mr. Collins another glance. This time, it was heavy with hostility and suspicion.

"It's the same feeling I have whenever I'm near a portal," she whispered. "Or a being from Metamoor."

Cornelia shook her head in confusion. She'd seen Will go limp, pale, and shaky in the presence of Metamoorian magic. It was almost as if the evil of Metamoor and the good of Candracar were duking it out in the girl's head! Cornelia might have envied Will's special role

as the Heart of Candracar's keeper, but she definitely didn't covet those fainting spells. They looked awful.

But did they *always* mean that evil was lurking about? Cornelia glanced at Mr. Collins skeptically. The worst thing he seemed capable of was assigning too much homework. The truth was, the Guardians had barely had their powers long enough for them to recognise any patterns in all this magical madness.

Before Cornelia could muse any further about Will's dizzy spell, a more pressing issue emerged.

"This year's programme is extensive," Mr. Collins said suddenly. He rose from his chair and began stalking down one of the classroom aisles. He approached Will's desk.

Uh-oh, Cornelia thought. I've got a bad feeling about this.

"So," Mr. Collins continued, "I've decided to give you a healthy review. Will? Can you remind us what life was like in the Middle Ages?"

"Me?" Will squeaked. She'd still been pulling her notebook and pencils from her backpack when Mr. Collins had suddenly

alighted by her desk. She was completely unprepared to be in the teacher's spotlight.

"You already quizzed me in class yesterday," Will murmured.

"I know," Mr. Collins replied breezily. "But, as Mr. Lipsitz pointed out, I'm in a bad mood today."

"I – I don't remember the part about the Middle Ages," Will stuttered nervously. "It's been a long time."

"Uh-huh," Mr. Collins replied. This time, the sarcasm in his voice had a new, hostile edge to it. "You talk about time with a history teacher. Clever."

The mischievous glint returned to Mr. Collins' eyes. Then he shrugged and said to Will, "Let's do it like this. *We'll* move on to the Renaissance period, while *you* spend the next few days writing a report on the state of man during the Middle Ages!"

"Do you know what I have to say to that, Mr. Collins?" Will spat. Her upper lip curled in anger and her forehead was furrowed. "Forget it!" she snapped, in a completely un-Will way.

Something was up. Will had completely lost her cool – something Cornelia never

allowed herself. Not in school, anyway!

It was a good thing Will *wasn't* in school at the moment. History class had let out hours ago. Now, Will was on her lunch break, lolling on the Sheffield Institute lawn with her fellow Guardians and regaling them with the tale of her unjust treatment in history class.

"Whoa!" Irma breathed in awe. Hay Lin's and Taranee's eyes widened as they munched on their sandwiches. "Will! You said that to Mr. Collins and he didn't hurl you out of class?"

Will hung her head.

"Actually . . . I really just replied, 'Yes, Mr. Collins,'" she said regretfully. "*But*, you should have heard my tone when I said it!"

Cornelia stifled a smirk. It was true. Will's wild ways had gone no further than a late arrival at history class and a response full of attitude. When Mr. Collins had announced his brutal homework assignment, Will was completely cowed.

"Cornelia," Will said to her with hurt eyes. "You saw the way he attacked me."

Cornelia nodded.

"I have to admit," Cornelia agreed. "He doesn't usually punish people so harshly."

"That should prove something," Will said. She ignored her own lunch as she fumed. "Collins can't be normal. I mean, remember Mrs. Rudolph? She came from Metamoor, too!"

How could Cornelia forget? One moment, Mrs. Rudolph had been an ordinary maths teacher – a plodding, portly, seemingly innocent woman. The next thing they knew, she had been transformed into a creature from Metamoor, who looked like a cross between a dreadlocked beach bum and a rhinoceros! She'd insisted to the girls that she was on Metamoor's good team. But Elyon, in one of her visits to the Guardians, had insisted that Mrs. Rudolph was a traitor. The Guardians had no idea whom they could trust. So, at the moment, they trusted no one.

That didn't mean, however, that they were going to start accusing a completely *new* set of suspects of inner scaliness!

"Come on, *another* monster?" Cornelia asked Will skeptically. "And you're only feeling it now? Don't you think it's possible that you just have something personal against Mr. Collins?"

Will's eyes flashed.

"Are you saying I'm making all this up?" she screeched at Cornelia.

Smelling a hint of strife in the air, the other girls stopped munching.

"I'm only saying," Cornelia said, as delicately as she could, "that maybe you *believe* you had that fainting spell. Maybe – "

"Stop!" Will barked, slamming her fists down. "Don't say anything else."

She scanned the rest of the group.

"Do you think Cornelia's right?" she asked softly.

Cornelia felt a prickle of panic on the back of her neck.

Oh, no, she thought. Just when we were beginning to get along, Will has to go all supersensitive on me.

But at least the other girls saw her side of things.

"Come on, Will," Hay Lin said sweetly. "You have to admit, it's a strange coincidence."

"And you *have* already said," Taranee pointed out, "that Mr. Collins is a spy for your mother. . . That your mum's all worried about your grades."

Even Irma reluctantly got on board.

"I don't usually agree with Cornelia," she announced, "but this time . . ."

"You know what?" Will said, hanging her head and lurching to her feet. "I've gotta go."

Will turned and began plodding towards Sheffield's front gate. She seemed to have forgotten that the girls had a whole afternoon of classes left.

She's also forgotten that we Guardians are on the same team, Cornelia thought indignantly. The moment there's even an ounce of disagreement, she bails. Maybe she's not such a leader after all!

The other girls looked less annoyed than chagrined. In fact, Taranee looked as knotted up as one of her tight braids.

"Will!" she called after her friend. "Wait!"

"Taranee," Cornelia said quietly. "You need to just let her go."

"But she's upset!" Taranee protested.

"No," Cornelia stated. "She's confused. We're the Guardians. A lot of strange things are happening to us. But that doesn't mean we have to see danger – and Metamoorians – *every-*

where."

Even as Cornelia said it, she felt a twinge in her gut. Was what she had said true?

She shook her head in annoyance.

Great, she thought ruefully. Another nasty change in my world. I used to be so sure of myself. I knew what I liked and what I didn't. I knew what was right and what was wrong, who was an Infielder, and who was an Outfielder.

Then along comes Will Vandom – and a bunch of superpowers I never asked for – and suddenly I don't know which end is up!

THREE

Mr. Collins stood on the edge of the Sheffield Institute's wide lawn and crossed his arms over his thin chest. His breath flowed into his lungs – feeble things – with a faint, wheezing noise. His body felt weak, ineffectual . . . old!

The scene he was witnessing on the other side of the grass, however, perked him right up.

Will Vandom was lurching to her feet and staring down at a quartet of her little friends. Even though Mr. Collins was too far away to see Will's big, brown eyes, her body language communicated everything he needed to know.

Her shoulders were hunched beneath her ears – an especially annoying nervous habit, Mr. Collins thought. She pointed accusingly at the most elegant girl in the group –

Cornelia. And then she began to trudge away.

Cutting class, Will? Mr. Collins wondered with a low, snarky laugh. Okay, let's just add that to the list of blights on your day.

With that thought, Mr. Collins began to pad lightly across the grass. He didn't worry about all the students lounging under trees and tossing Frisbees. He was a teacher, which meant he was invisible. Mr. Collins rounded a corner of the looming main building and approached a smaller structure – the old administration quarters – nestled among a thicket of overgrown shrubs.

He breezed through the front door and glanced around. Half-empty paint cans were scattered on a tarpaulin, and a ladder led up to the exposed ductwork in the ceiling. A band of striped, plastic tape blocked off a dramatic, marble staircase.

Mr. Collins sneered at the blockade, then marched over to the stairs. With one finger, he lifted the tape to shoulder height. He was just ducking beneath it when a guttural voice rang out behind him.

"Mr. Collins!"

The teacher straightened up and growled in

annoyance. He forced a tight smile onto his face, and turned around.

A stout man in white coveralls and a dirty baseball cap was hurrying towards him. It was Bertold, one of the school custodians.

And a big busybody, Mr. Collins thought. Everywhere I go, it seems, there's Bertold. The guy really gets around for someone so pudgy!

"Don't you know this side of the school is closed for repairs?" the janitor demanded of Mr. Collins.

"Of course I know," Mr. Collins replied with a jovial laugh. "You already told me that, this morning."

Then Mr. Collins leaned over to peer directly into Bertold's eyes. His smile hardened as he added, "And as you did this morning, you will now forget you ever saw me!"

With a sigh of satisfaction, Mr. Collins watched the custodian's dull, brown eyes grow even duller. His lids grew heavy and his mouth slackened. In a monotone, Bertold said, "Yes, sir. I'll go now, sir."

Bertold turned around and walked like a robot down the hall.

Mr. Collins tweaked his moustache and

slipped beneath the tape, striding up the stairs. He glanced over his shoulder and sneered at Bertold's back, as the man trundled away.

Earth people, he thought in disdain. Bah! Some minds are too easy to control. But I must admit . . .

Mr. Collins lifted a hand to his shock of thick, brown hair and gave his scalp a vicious rub.

The mind belonging to the *real* Mr. Collins was giving him a rough time.

The man walked briskly through a sun-filled hallway at the top of the stairs and entered a dusky office, a space once occupied by the vice principal.

Sitting in quiet bewilderment at a desk in the corner was Mr. Collins's exact double, from the thick, brown hair to the brushlike moustache to the professorial, blue blazer and tie.

"Collins!" said the "false" Mr. Collins in a loud voice. "Can you hear me?"

From his seat at the desk, the teacher spoke thickly, as if he were half asleep. His voice droned in the same monotone Bertold had assumed after having been hypnotized.

"Yes," he murmured.

"The break has ended," the false Mr. Collins declared. He strode over to the real Mr. Collins's desk and planted his hands on the surface, leaning over to glare into eyes exactly like his own.

"When you go back to your classroom," the false Mr. Collins ordered, "you won't remember anything. Clear?"

"Yes."

The teacher lurched out of his chair and shuffled foggily out of the office.

The false Mr. Collins dusted off his hands and sighed with relief. But as he got ready to get back to his *own* work, he paused.

I think I'll watch him for a minute, he thought.

Grinning slyly, he silently followed the hapless history teacher down the hallway. Then he hid behind a corner to watch the real Mr. Collins walk down the staircase and duck beneath the security tape.

And, of course, there, again, was that bumbler, Bertold, sweeping up paint chips at the base of the stairs! He looked at the real Mr. Collins disapprovingly.

"Professor!" he scolded. "Even if construction has been stopped, this side of the school is still forbidden to the public."

The real Mr. Collins nodded agreeably and headed for the door. Behind him, Bertold leaned on his broom and said, "Why do I have the feeling I've already told you this?"

Slowly, the real Mr. Collins turned around. He shook his head, as if he had been trying to knock cobwebs out of his brain, and shrugged.

"Maybe it's déjà vu, Bertold," he said.

Then he shook his head again . . . and looked around the dusty old foyer.

"Now that you mention it," he breathed in confusion. "I'm a bit confused, too. What . . . what am I doing here?"

While the befuddled teacher shambled from the building, the man spying on him from the top of the stairs gave a low, satisfied cackle.

Neither Bertold nor Mr. Collins had remembered a thing, he confirmed to himself gleefully. Not that he didn't have absolute faith in his own powers. He just liked to see them in action every once in a while.

Speaking of which . . . he thought as he

turned back into the hallway. It's time to take a little restorative action for myself.

Standing in front of a window, the man gazed at his own reflection. He smirked at himself in the glass, then gave a quick nod.

A silvery shimmer surrounded his body, thrumming and roiling like a sudden burst of steam. As the magic melted away, so, too, did the irritating, brushlike moustache, the bland, friendly face, the rounded shoulders, and the practical suit.

In their place appeared long, flowing, blond hair and a jawline so sharp it could cut paper. The eyes, still leering, had morphed from hazel to icy blue. They squinted in a sinister smile.

Ah, Cedric thought in relief. That's it. I can work much better this way!

Now in a more comfortable form, he stalked back down the hallway and swept down the stairs. He had to get to the bookshop. It was the only place where he could find peace. *And* where he could enact the next leg of his plan.

Minutes later, Cedric was in the bookshop. Once inside, he breathed in the musty, dusty air with relish.

Oh, but it wasn't the shelves filled with old books that brought Cedric comfort. Or the warm shafts of rainbow sunlight that shot through the elegant, stained-glass windows. No, it was the bookshop's proximity to his home – to Metamoor. The building housed a portal to Cedric's world.

And waiting for him there was Prince Phobos. Just the thought of Phobos – his power, his fury, his chiseled face and long, wheat-coloured hair – made Cedric shudder. He didn't know whether he admired the prince as much as he feared him.

The moment such a thought entered Cedric's mind, he shook it away. Such disloyalty was inexcusable! Phobos was his ruler. Cedric served him unconditionally. That was all. And if the prince's cruelty caused Cedric pain, he would just have to deal with it on his own. It certainly was something that had to be kept hidden from Elyon. Nothing must dissuade her from forsaking her "parents" and friends for her brother, Phobos. And nothing could be allowed to sway her faith in Cedric's power.

The same went for Vathek. The big, blue lug

had been endlessly loyal to Cedric.

And now, Cedric thought, my trust in the monster will be put to the test. Let's see if he's up to the task.

Cedric strode through the shop to a door made of yellowed, frosted glass. Opening the door with magic – there was no reason to soil his own hands – Cedric stepped into a small back office and approached an ornate, gold lectern. Atop the stand was an ancient book. Its leather cover was crinkled with age and dirt.

Flipping open the book, Cedric waved a casual hand over the pages. A wisp of magic trailed from his fingertips and danced lightly over the parchment. Then the wisp pulled backwards, as if teasing a thread loose from a sweater.

What emerged from the book, however, was much more interesting than a slip of string. It was a magical vision-cloud – a hazy screen through which Cedric could see, and talk to, his aide back in Metamoor.

With another flick of his magical finger, Cedric summoned Vathek. The beast's head emerged in the cloud as clearly as an earthly

being might appear in a video monitor. Vathek, who viewed Cedric's image through a translucent jewel in one of his brass wrist cuffs, bowed his bulbous head reverently.

Cedric cleared his throat to deepen his voice. Then he spoke.

"Talk to me, faithful Vathek," he intoned. "Tell me how things are going."

"Well, Cedric," Vathek responded. "I've entered Metamoor's underground and infiltrated the rebels who long to escape to earth. I told them that I betrayed you."

"Go on," Cedric urged.

"Unfortunately," Vathek admitted, "some don't believe me. So now they are divided. Those who fell for my trick are now under my orders."

"Really," Cedric said drily. "I didn't know you were so charismatic, old friend."

Inside, however, Cedric felt a sense of excitement. The plan was working! Phobos would be pleased.

Vathek was speaking once again. Cedric shook himself out of his happiness and returned to the conversation.

"Those on my 'team' are few and desperate,"

the blue henchman was saying. "They would believe anybody."

"Well, make sure they don't influence you!" Cedric warned. "Remember whom you must obey."

"I won't forget, my master," Vathek said, from his little cloud. "I only wonder why we must deceive them."

"We're not deceiving them," Cedric said. "We're giving them an actual chance to invade earth. We're even helping them get there without interference! After all, I'm using all my resources to weaken the Guardians."

Vathek flashed a snaggletoothed grin.

"May I ask how?" he inquired.

"First of all," Cedric said, "I'm undermining all the closest relationships of Will, the keeper of the Heart of Candracar. I've got her fighting with her mother and giving the cold shoulder to her friends. It was easy enough to add a little confusion into her life. Before you know it, she'll be useless to her fellow Guardians.

"But," Cedric continued, "I haven't done this alone. Elyon will supply the finishing stroke."

Vathek nodded enthusiastically.

"And so the plan will take place tonight?" he inquired.

"Yes, Vathek," Cedric said. "Instill rage in your followers. Teach them to distrust the Guardians."

As Cedric issued his final orders, he felt another thrill of excitement shoot through his veins. Deceit. Destruction. And most of all, pleasing Phobos – it really did warm his heart!

"Yes," Cedric repeated slyly. "We'll leave the rebels the task of destroying our pesky Guardians – destroying them with their rage!"

FOUR

Will turned her back on her friends, blocking out their troubled, skeptical faces.

She trudged out Sheffield's front gate.

And then she headed for the school's bike rack. She'd unlocked her red bike and begun pedaling away before she fully realised what she was doing. Because what she was doing was totally ditching school! This was a first in the history of Will Vandom – eternal good girl, follower of rules, Guardian without a clue.

Of course, Will thought drily, being anointed to save the world is a first, too.

And here was another – having her friends totally turn on her! Will couldn't believe they'd been so dismissive of her Mr. Collins–is–evil theory.

They don't know what it feels like, Will thought, to walk by a Metamoorian and think you're gonna have your head explode. Morosely, she pedaled down the street, leaving Sheffield's bustling, laughter-filled, lunchtime scene far behind her.

And they don't know what it feels like to be the group's fifth wheel, Will said to herself as a lump rose in her throat. They're earth, air, fire, and water. Cornelia, Hay Lin, Taranee, and Irma fit together like peas in a pod. Meanwhile, I'm the odd Guardian out. What am I doing here?

At that thought, Will let a little sob escape her throat. She'd thought she belonged in their clique. She'd even started to feel comfortable in Heatherfield. But she'd been wrong. She was an outsider.

A mopey, school-skipping outsider at that!

I *hate* Heatherfield, Will thought, giving her bike bell a vicious tweak. It twanged in off-key protest.

I didn't want to come here, Will thought. And my mother knew it all along. Standing up on her bike pedals, Will climbed a short hill. When she reached the top, she could see a

swath of annoyingly beautiful buildings; a wrought-iron fence guarding a charming park; and . . . sitting on the curb with a guitar at his feet . . . a boy.

But not just any boy! It was Matt – Will's sweet-eyed crush. He was the only thing that made Heatherfield bearable at that moment.

"Hello!" Will chirped, braking at Matt's feet with a breathless skid. "What are you doing here?"

Matt unfolded his long, lanky limbs to stand up and smile at Will.

Ohhhhh, Will thought tremulously. So tall. So cute!

"I'm on the afternoon schedule at school," Matt explained. "What about you? Aren't you supposed to be at Sheffield, right now?"

"Well . . . I . . ." Will couldn't even begin to wrap her brain around the proper Matt-impressing strategy. Would he think cutting class was cool? Or should she protect her good-girl rep and tell him she had had a doctor's appointment? Or should she just keep staring up into his chocolaty-brown eyes?

"Hey, Matt!"

It looked as though the answer was to be

none of the above. At the sound of a guy's voice bellowing his name, Matt looked away from Will and peeked over his shoulder. A trio of scruffy dudes with guitars and drums slung over their shoulders were gazing at Matt expectantly. Will recognised them – they were the other members of Cobalt Blue, Matt's band.

His very cool band, Will thought, in which he plays lead guitar and sings. *Sighhhhh.*

"Come on, man," the goateed bass player shouted. "You're the only one missing."

"Coming," Matt called out. Then he turned back to Will with an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry," he said. "The boys in the band are waiting. We're gonna go try out for a gig at Sheffield!"

Will felt her head nod up and down enthusiastically. It felt strangely detached from her body, for some reason. But she was glad it – her head, that is – had taken the lead and was responding to Matt with appropriate gestures. That left Will's brain free to imagine herself holding hands with Matt.

And going to the movies with Matt.

And kissing Ma –

"I'll see you later, okay?" Matt was saying.

Will came crashing back to reality.

Earth to Crush Girl, she said to herself. He's talking to you!

She nodded and gave Matt a little wave.

"Sure, no problem," she said. "Go ahead."

He went – running over to join his buds. When he reached them, the bass player grabbed the hood of Matt's grey sweatshirt and yanked it playfully over his shaggy, brown hair. Then he dragged Matt down the sidewalk while Matt struggled against him, guffawing loudly.

He's *soooo* mature, Will thought, gazing after her crush. If he liked me, I mean really liked me, *then* I'd have a good reason to stay in Heatherfield.

When, and only when, Matt had disappeared over the hill, Will sighed and climbed back onto her bike. Then, wistfully, she made her way slowly home.

Walking through the door of the breezy loft she shared with her mum, she looked around. Just the other day, they'd finally finished unpacking all of the boxes after their move. Mum had arranged the cushy, red couch and bookshelves into a welcoming room. And

she'd baked chocolate-chip cookies – the scent still hung in the air. The place was *almost* beginning to feel homey to Will.

It helped that she had a pet to greet her at the door. The moment Will stepped inside the loft, her little dormouse came running towards her. It wrinkled its nose at Will happily, its fluffy tail bobbing with excitement.

"Hey," Will said. "How did you manage to get out of my bedroom?"

Will usually kept her critter locked in her room during the day. It tended to make nests out of *anything* soft, and it had an uncanny knack for worming its way into the cookie jar. To say it was a nuisance was an understatement.

But today, Will was glad to see the dormouse. It jumped into her arms, then quickly scampered onto her shoulders.

"I actually didn't feel like coming home today," Will admitted to the dormouse. It nosed at her cheek with a little squeak. "After all, all my problems started here. But where else am I supposed to go? I don't feel like seeing *anybody*!"

Will flopped onto the couch. The jolt sent

the dormouse bouncing onto her head! She waited for it to jump off again, but the animal seemed to like it up there. So Will shrugged and glanced at the answering machine, which sat on a buffet table behind the couch. Its red light was blinking. Will reached for the PLAY button.

"I bet it's a message from Mum," she sighed. Then she assumed her mother's grown-up voice and mimicked, "'Hello honey! I'll be back late again tonight. Keep your cell phone on so I can find you. Blah, blah, blah . . .'"

Rolling her eyes, Will pressed the button.

"*Beeeeeep* . . . It's me, honey!" Mum's voice echoed from the machine. "I'll be late tonight. But I'll be bringing something home for dinner. So, keep your cell phone on and – "

Will cut off the rest of her mother's message with a jab at the pause button. Then she shot her dormouse a smug smile.

"Did you hear that?" she crowed. "I was so right. Okay, let's see if there are any more surprises on here."

Will sped through her mum's message and hit PLAY again. Now, a new voice piped out of

the machine. And this one made Will jump.

"Hello, Will," trilled a young woman. "It's Vera! I have some great news for you. Come on down to the pool when you can!"

"Yes! My new swim coach," Will cried. "That's all I need to hear!"

She jumped off the couch, sending the dormouse scampering for footing. Its claws dug into the fabric of the cherry-red couch. But Will didn't have time to reprimand it. She had someplace to be.

I'll get my swim bag and head over to the pool right now, she thought as she ran out of the room. "Swimming helps me think, anyway," she added breathlessly.

Only a few seconds later, Will was heading for the door, her orange mesh swim bag bouncing at her side. She waved to the dormouse, which was still scampering around on the couch and sniffing at the answering machine. She had just played a few messages for her mum and was now nearing the end of its voice mail queue.

"Off I go," Will announced to the dormouse. "See ya! Don't break anything!"

As Will flounced happily out of the loft, she

thought she heard her mother's voice, echoing out of the answering machine once again. Out of habit, she started to pause and to listen carefully.

But then she remembered that she and her mum were feuding. Which meant Mum's message could just wait!

Even if that message were: "It's Mum again. I forgot to mention one thing – I love you!"

The words half registered in Will's fretful mind. But then she shook her head and imagined herself diving into the warm, welcoming blue water of Sheffield's indoor swimming pool. Decisively, she turned from the door and headed down the hall.

She had someplace to be. Maybe she'd feel like giving Mum's voice mail a more thoughtful listen later.

FIVE

After Will left them on the Sheffield lawn, the remaining Guardians blinked at each other in surprise. Talk about a meltdown!

Nobody was more troubled by Will's tantrum than Hay Lin. If Hay Lin had learned anything from her grandmother before she had passed away, it was that the Guardians had to stick together.

Hay Lin's grandmother knew that rule better than anyone. All of Hay Lin's life, her grandmother had filled her head with stories, from ancient Chinese fables to tales of ancient Greek philosophers. She'd also urged her granddaughter to believe in magic.

Hay Lin's parents had thought the old woman was simply eccentric. Now, Hay Lin

knew the truth – her grandmother had once been a Guardian herself! And when the Oracle had decided that Hay Lin and her friends would take up the saving-the-world torch, it had been her grandmother who had told them all about their new powers and responsibilities. She had also given Hay Lin a magical map of Heatherfield, one that pointed out the location of Metamoorian portals.

Hay Lin wondered what her grandmother was thinking as Will stalked away from the group – for she was sure Grandma was peeking down at them from Candracar. Did her grandmother fear that W.i.t.c.h. was falling apart?

Or was she nodding knowingly and saying, "Silly girls. I remember when I squabbled with my fellow Guardians. We were making up over tea and cookies within an hour."

I'm gonna go with that second scenario, Hay Lin thought with a firm nod as the early bell rang. Her grin restored, Hay Lin popped to her feet and threw away the dregs of her lunch – dumplings and sesame noodles left over from her parents' Chinese restaurant. Then she grabbed her pink backpack and followed her friends into the school.

The moment they arrived in the crowded hallway, the warning bell rang above their heads. Cornelia gave her friends a wave and hurried off to her class. She hated to be late.

Irma and Taranee, on the other hand, lingered in the hallway with Hay Lin for a moment. Their maths class, after all, was only steps away and their substitute teacher was nowhere to be seen yet.

Bells, bells, bells, Hay Lin thought happily. Ever since my new power arrived, they sound like much more than noisy things herding us into our classrooms. These bells are filled with dozens of gossip sessions and a symphony of locker slams. With millions of memories.

That about summed up Hay Lin's new magic. Any sound she heard sent scenes from the past flashing through her mind. She'd first discovered the ability when the girls were sneaking around Mrs. Rudolph's house, searching for portals and clues.

The moment Hay Lin had happened upon an old music box in Mrs. Rudolph's hallway, she had gotten a blast from the past. In her mind, she'd seen Mrs. Rudolph in her scaly Metamoorian form. She'd been crossing

through a portal from Metamoor to earth. And she hadn't been alone. With her had been a couple and an infant. Hay Lin now knew that they had been Elyon and her parents – the people everyone had believed to be Elyon's parents, anyway.

Whether Hay Lin had been witnessing baby Elyon's rescue or a kidnapping was unclear.

But one thing Hay Lin did know – her new power was amazing! Even when it came to her through the ringing of yet another bell. This one was the "Get to class, now. I mean it!" bell.

Of course, Hay Lin's friends weren't nearly as enamoured of the sound as she was.

"Yikes!" Irma squealed, clapping her hands over her ears.

"Yeah, yeah, we're going, already!" Taranee complained, glaring up at the bell.

"Actually, I think it's quite a nice bit of music," Hay Lin said with a smile.

"You call *that* music?" Irma gasped, as Taranee hurried over with an awed expression on her face. She glanced around at the kids dashing to class. When she was sure nobody

was eavesdropping, she said to Hay Lin, "You can use your power on that off-key bell?"

"I can do it selectively," Hay Lin explained, with a happy shrug. "Every melody is linked to a certain memory, and I get to feel it."

"Melody," Irma scoffed, shaking her head.

"For example . . ." Hay Lin began. She closed her eyes, letting an image that had been hazy a moment ago clarify itself in her mind. "That bell brought me a memory of a boy who loved walking down these halls."

Then Hay Lin cocked her head. She was envisioning something else! Something in the dying echo of students' footsteps, shuffling to their classrooms. The sound was so enticing, she couldn't help dropping to her hands and knees for a better listen.

"Even the sound of footsteps in the hall is distinct," she whispered to Irma and Taranee. They stood behind her, breathlessly waiting to hear what memory Hay Lin would come up with next.

"Do you hear it?" Hay Lin continued, bending her head and frowning in concentration. "The footsteps are light. Hesitant. I remember . . ."

"Mrs. Rudolph!" Irma squealed from her spot behind Hay Lin.

"You think so?" Hay Lin asked, listening harder and squeezing her eyes shut. "I'm actually thinking it's Bertold, the janitor."

When Hay Lin got no response, she peeked over her shoulder. That's when she realised Irma and Taranee hadn't been reminiscing about Mrs. Rudolph! They'd been looking right at her!

The teacher – whom the Guardians had last seen in Metamoor, in her armour of brown scales and dreadlocks – was back in her plump, human guise. She was wearing a cardigan sweater, a green scarf, and oversized spectacles. She looked every bit the maths teacher. With a smile, she walked towards the girls.

"Wow!" Hay Lin whispered to her friends. "It's really her!"

"Why are you looking at me that way?" Mrs. Rudolph asked slyly as she came to a halt in front of the girls. "I'm back from my vacation. Is that such a big surprise?"

"Yes!" Irma retorted, glaring at the teacher and placing her fists on her hips. "Did you rest enough in *Metamoor*?"

"Don't be so suspicious," Mrs. Rudolph scoffed. "Have you forgotten that I saved your life in Metamoor?"

Then she turned to Taranee and gave her a kind smile. Taking the stunned girl's chin in her hand, she said, "And you, Taranee. I'm glad to see you're well!"

"Th – thank you," Taranee replied, looking confused.

But Irma wasn't going to let Mrs. Rudolph off so easy.

"Tell us the truth," she said. "You don't belong in this world. Why did you come back?"

"To save you again," Mrs. Rudolph replied. "I couldn't leave you in the hands of that substitute teacher."

Hay Lin put a hand over her mouth to suppress a snort of laughter. Mrs. Rudolph was almost . . . cool! Cool, that is, for a maths-teacher-turned-monster who just might be the Guardians' enemy.

"Jokes aside," Mrs. Rudolph continued, glancing at Hay Lin with a smile in her eyes, "when you discovered my true nature, I had to escape. In your eyes, I looked monstrous. And

when something frightens human beings, they tend to destroy the cause of the fear."

Hay Lin shot her friends a guilty look. There was no denying what Mrs. Rudolph had said. That which was foreign was frightening, whether it came in the form of Outfielders at school or talking lizards from Metamoor.

"But now," Mrs. Rudolph said, cutting short Hay Lin's guilt trip, "I really think we could help one another."

"How?" Irma demanded.

Mrs. Rudolph glanced around the empty hallway.

"The school is not the right place to talk about this," she said. "Why don't you all come to my house this afternoon for tea and cookies?"

Tea and cookies! Hay Lin thought. Just as Grandma said in my daydream. It must be a sign. So, though Taranee and Irma continued to look skeptical, Hay Lin nodded.

The girls followed Mrs. Rudolph into the classroom and hurried to their seats. The teacher settled into her seat at the front of the room.

"Good morning, everyone," she announced.

"Quiet down. As I was telling some of your classmates, I've taken a vacation. . ."

Blah, blah, blah, Hay Lin thought. I've gotta admit, I kind of liked having the substitute teacher. She was a breeze. And even if Mrs. Rudolph is an impostor, she's a really good one. Her algebra homework always is pretty tough. And her return means it's back to the grind.

Mrs. Rudolph started the lesson – something about binomials. Yawn! But, mindful of her grade, Hay Lin did her best to listen.

The only problem? Another voice was echoing in her head! A voice that sounded a lot like Taranee's!

Hay Lin glanced at her friend. Taranee wasn't whispering. In fact, she was staring down at her notebook in rapt concentration.

But Hay Lin was sure she could hear Taranee's voice, reedy, whispery, but distinct, in her brain.

Irma! Taranee was saying. *Can you hear me?*

Taranee! Irma's voice replied. Hay Lin peeked at Irma. Her friend's eyes were sparkling with delight and surprise. But, like Taranee's, her lips were motionless. *Are you communicating with me mentally?*

Yes! Taranee replied, grinning at her friend. *And you're answering. Will and I discovered this power when I was in Metamoor. I wanted to test it out with you.*

Are you saying, Irma gasped in Hay Lin's mind, *we can talk and nobody can hear us?*

Uh-huh! Taranee responded. *Now I'll try to contact Hay Lin, too!*

I hear you, girls! Hay Lin thought.

One glance at Irma and Taranee, smiling at her in glee, told her that they'd heard her.

This is absolutely better than note-passing, Hay Lin communicated to her girlfriends with a giggle.

Listen, Taranee said. *I can't keep the mental link for long. So, what should we do? Do we go to Mrs. Rudolph's tonight?*

I don't know, Irma replied. *She's too suspicious! I don't trust her!*

I say let's go, Hay Lin said with a shrug. She glanced over at Mrs. Rudolph to be sure her teacher couldn't see the girls making eye contact. The woman seemed immersed in the maths lesson.

I'm curious, Hay Lin continued.

All right, Irma replied reluctantly. *But only*

with Will and Cornelia. Without them, I won't go back inside that house. No way!

Good idea, Hay Lin thought. *Especially where Will is concerned. I'm worried about her. Hey!*

Hay Lin saw both Irma and Taranee jump.

Whoops! she thought, giving her friends an apologetic smile. *I guess even silent communication has a volume control.*

Anyway, she continued, *can you contact Will, Taranee? We could ask her right now!*

Only by phone, Taranee said. *She's too far away. This power of mine is still limited. But you're right. The last thing we want is to find out that Cedric is behind Mrs. Rudolph's strange behaviour, manipulating things with his deceit and lies.*

No, Taranee continued, her voice echoing eerily in Hay Lin's head now. It was getting more wispy and ghostly. In a moment, Hay Lin felt sure, Taranee's magic would give out. The girls would be left to note-passing and, ugh, paying attention to their algebra lesson. *We need to go to Mrs. Rudolph's as a team,* Taranee thought.

The last thing Hay Lin heard before Taranee's thoughts quieted, leaving Hay Lin with a strangely hollow feeling in her head, was, *We need Will!*

SIX

Will swam down her lane of the pool, feeling the water skim over her body with each kick.

Ah, the freestyle, she thought.

It was her favourite stroke. It made her feel powerful and free and completely weightless. It made her want to stay in that chlorine-scented haven forever.

I have plenty of other reasons to hide here, Will thought, before plunging upside down to execute a perfect flip-turn. Wouldn't it be nice to never again have to deal with my nagging mother and my doubting friends, not to mention all those big, surly creatures from Metamoor?

The only person, Will thought, as she began to whiz through another lap, I would

actually like to see would be –

"Have you decided to train yourself, Will?"

At the sound of a bubbly voice, Will popped her head out of the water. It was Vera! She was standing at the end of Will's lane, grinning down at her. Will sped to the wall at the end of her lane and hoisted herself halfway out of the water.

"Hi, Vera!" she chirped. "I got your message."

"Yes, but I thought I told you we'd start training *after* school," Vera said with a kind smile. "Not during. What would your mother say if she found out you were here?"

"I know," Will said, pulling the swim cap off her head gloomily. "I've never skipped class before. But . . ."

Will's voice trailed off as she remembered who she was talking to. Vera may have been sweet and pretty and younger than most of the adults in Will's world. But she was still a swim coach. That was practically a teacher!

". . . I had to do it," Will finished weakly, sure that Vera was going to reprimand her.

She gave Vera a fearful, sidelong glance. But instead of whipping out a demerit book or glar-

ing at her and hissing, "*Truant,*" Vera merely smiled sympathetically.

"Want to talk about it?" she asked.

A half hour later, Will was lounging in Heatherfield's newest coffeehouse. It was a sun-filled, mod space with floor-to-ceiling windows and candy-coloured, moulded, plastic furniture. The scent of cinnamon-spiked espresso wafted pleasantly beneath Will's nose as she watched Vera lean against the front counter. A tousled-haired waiter was handing her a couple of cups of steaming hot coffee.

"Two cappuccinos, Vera," he announced.

"Thanks, Bill," the coach burbled in reply. "You're the best!"

When Vera rejoined Will at their window-side table, Will took a slurp of the sweet, milky coffee, and she looked around happily.

"This is a nice café," she said.

"Yes," Vera nodded. She pointed at Bill, who was frothing up some mochas – *and* giving Vera sidelong looks. "And the waiter isn't so bad, either!"

"Vera!" Will giggled into her cappuccino foam. "What are you saying?"

"That there are a lot of people in the world besides your four friends and Matt!" Vera declared with an exaggerated yawn.

"In the *world*, maybe," Will agreed. "But in Heatherfield . . ."

"Listen to me," Vera said, reaching across their orange table to place her hand on top of Will's. "Don't waste your time with that guy Matt. You deserve something better!"

Was Vera proposing that she simply discard her crush like a stack of junk mail? Even if she wanted to, how could she ever get that strong, scruffy chin and those warm, brown eyes out of her head?

"Matt means a lot to me," Will protested. "Even . . . if he doesn't really know it."

Hearing how pathetic her own words sounded, Will's shoulders slumped. Vera's scoffing didn't help matters.

"Listen to yourself," Vera said. "You're daydreaming about the wrong guy!"

While Will squirmed uncomfortably in her slick chair, Vera moved on to an even touchier subject.

"As for your friends," she said, "you still haven't told me why you had a fight."

As Vera took a sip of coffee and gazed at Will with inquisitive blue eyes, Will bit her lip. She had to tread carefully there. No matter how much she might have trusted Vera, she still couldn't let her in on the group's secret. *Nobody* could be told the truth. The loss of their anonymity would put a serious damper on their war with the Metamoorians.

Just the thought of exposure made Will very nervous. She found herself speaking with exaggerated care.

"My friends and I . . . had a difference of opinion," she told Vera. "Especially me and Cornelia. She'd love to be the leader of our group."

"So you let her," Vera offered casually. She leaned back in her seat and smiled, just as Bill approached their table with a plate of croissants. Sending the waiter a flirty glance, Vera said to Will, "Let your friend Cornelia take what she wants. At your age, it's easy to make new friends."

For a moment – just a moment – Will let himself imagine such a thing. Saying goodbye to her friends, and to their increasingly daunting idea, gave her a second of relief.

But an instant later, that relief was replaced by a terrible pang. Never dishing with Taranee again? Never being able to hear about Irma's latest flirtation? Viewing Hay Lin's far-out fashion only from a distance?

Will shook her head. The idea was unthinkable.

"I can't walk away from my friends," Will insisted to Vera. She let out a big sigh. "There's . . . well, something big that links us."

If you only knew *how* big, Will thought ruefully. She gazed into her coffee cup, afraid her eyes would betray her anxious thoughts.

Luckily, Vera had moved on to a new topic.

"Hey," she said with a shrug. "Do what you've gotta do. But let's get to the reason I called you – to talk about your swimming in the All-State Championship!"

"Really?" Will squealed, jumping out of her seat. "Yahoo!"

Every eye in the coffeehouse swiveled towards Will.

Uh, did I just scream and yell in the middle of a crowded coffeehouse? Will thought, feeling herself turn red. Maybe Cornelia's right. Leadership *has* gone to my head.

But Will was too happy to get all angsty about her gaffe. She merely flopped back into her seat and gazed at Vera with incredulity.

"That's fantastic news!" she said to the beaming swim coach. "Of course, my mother won't take it well."

"She'll have to," Vera said, breezy as ever. "It's official. You're representing our school at the championship. I'll talk to your mum."

Vera reached across the table to grab Will's hand again.

"She'll change her mind when she sees what you can do."

"Oh, Vera," Will sighed happily. "You're too good to be true!"

Already, images of herself were forming in Will's mind. She saw herself climbing onto the starting block in front of a throng of screaming fans. Hearing a buzzer blare as she touched the wall first. Climbing onto a medal stand and bowing her head to receive her reward.

Of course, her fantasy didn't last long; soon, unavoidable reality intruded. Guardian duties had already stretched Will's study schedule too thin. How was she going to add extra practise time on top of all that?

"Do you honestly think," Will asked Vera, "that I can study and train at the same time?"

She couldn't hide the shakiness in her voice. With each passing second, elation was giving way to apprehension.

But Vera waved Will's fears away with the same life-is-a-breeze bubbliness she always showed.

"Certainly," she declared. "It's only a question of organising your schedule. Speaking of which, you should probably hit the road, huh?"

Will glanced at her watch. Dinnertime was fast approaching, and she still had to deal with Mr. Collins' odious assignment!

"Yeah," she admitted. "I just have to get my bag from the locker room."

"Go on," Vera said. She glanced at the stuff scattered on the table. Among the crumpled napkins and croissant crumbs were her clipboard and Will's date book and cell phone. "Leave your stuff here. I'll guard it."

Will flashed Vera another grateful smile and popped out of her chair. As she darted to the closet in the front of the café, where she'd checked her backpack, she felt so light on her

feet she almost thought she could fly!

The feeling made Will pause in concern. Apprehensively, she glanced over her shoulder. She sighed with relief when she saw that her back was still just that – an unadorned back.

Whew, she thought. For a moment there, I thought I'd sprouted my wings!

Luckily, Will was still undercover. In fact, she felt as though her luck were changing all around! With Vera on her side, she felt as though there were nothing she couldn't do!

SEVEN

Vera watched Will jump up from their table and dash to the coat check. The girl was practically skipping!

Ah, Vera thought, I remember when paltry accomplishments excited me that much. I used to walk on air! Just like Will's doing now.

Memories flooded Vera's mind, and a dreamy expression crept onto her face. But her reverie was short-lived. An annoying *briiip, briiip, briiip* pierced her daydream, deflating it as if it were a balloon.

Ugh, she thought. Her smiling blue eyes narrowed in a squint. That sounds like an electronic cricket. I've always hated crickets. They never shut up!

Vera looked around for the source of the

annoying beeps. It was Will's cell phone! The thing was bleating and vibrating as if the world were coming to an end. Its tiny screen glowed a bright, acid green.

Vera regarded the phone with a cold frown. Then she sneered at the gadget.

"Be quiet, you!" she ordered the phone.

Immediately, the phone obeyed, falling silent with a *bluuurp*. Glancing around to make sure nobody was watching, Vera waved away the wisps of silvery magic that hovered around the phone.

Then she smiled smugly and took a sip of her cappuccino.

Of course, no sooner had she found a moment of peace than something *else* intruded upon it. This time, the invader was no chirping, robotic bug. But it was definitely a pest – in the form of her waiter, Bill! And Bill's flirtiness had evaporated as surely as had the cell phone's batteries. Now he was staring at Vera.

"The girl is right," he said, tucking his coffee tray beneath his arm and storming over to her table. "You *are* too good to be true."

"Ex*cuse* me?" Vera replied. She gazed up at Bill's boyish mop of brown hair and his thin

face. Did this dude know who he was dealing with?

Vera gave Bill an indignant, *intimidating* stare.

In response, Bill's eyes flashed. In fact . . . they changed colour! Ever so briefly, the waiter's warm, green eyes went icy blue. And he smirked at Vera in an impudent manner that could only belong to . . .

"Cedric!" Vera gasped out loud in recognition. "What are you doing here? Will mustn't see us together!"

"Be quiet," Cedric replied. His eyes returned to their bland, green colour and he ran a limp hand through his silky hair. "I'll return the waiter's body to him before Will comes back."

"Are you checking up on me?" Vera asked. "Do you think I can't do this?"

"No," Cedric said. "I just wanted to tell you you're doing a fantastic job."

Vera felt a lightness flutter through her chest. Actually, she had to quell a happy giggle before it escaped her lips! When the surge of joy had passed, she sighed.

Her current body still felt a bit unfamiliar.

It often did unexpected things, like breaking into a happy dance when one of her students shattered a personal record. Or almost melting with happiness when her mentor praised her – as he was doing at this very moment.

Cedric (in Bill form) leaned over Vera and put a warm arm around her shoulder. Gently, he turned her in her mod, plastic chair so that they both faced the large windows.

Vera blinked at her reflection. That tall, lithe body and tousled, golden ponytail. That slim face and those sharp collarbones of a woman well into her twenties. Was that . . . really her?

No, of course not. As Bill whispered into her ear, Vera's reflection began to fade. His did, too.

"Thanks to you, my plan is unfolding perfectly," Bill murmured, pointing at their cloudy reflections. At that moment, the images began to come back into focus. Vera stared at her own image.

Well, it wasn't hers *exactly*. While the physical bodies of Bill and Vera remained in the crowded café, the window showed them their true souls.

The waiter's boyish visage had been replaced by Cedric's, with Cedric's sharp cheek-

bones, waterfall of platinum hair, and fierce, blue eyes.

And Vera's womanly ways? They'd been supplanted by the face and body of a schoolgirl. A girl with wide, wan, blue eyes and straw-coloured braids. A girl who hadn't walked around Heatherfeld for quite some time now.

"Yes, you're doing an excellent job," Cedric told the girl. "My bright, skillful, and sly . . . Elyon!"

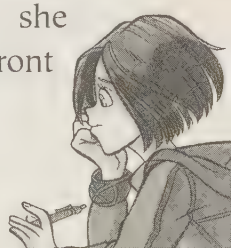
EIGHT

After giving Vera a grateful hug good-bye, Will went straight to the Sheffield library.

I'll show that Mr. Collins, she thought as she stomped up the steps of the looming, Gothic building. She'd admired the library many times when she'd walked by. It looked like a palace, complete with turrets, cupolas, and a slate roof with dormered windows. Will had always imagined that those dormers were the perfect little nooks for curling up with a good novel.

She'd *had* to imagine it, because this was the first time she'd ever set foot in the library.

I guess I really haven't been the most diligent student, Will thought guiltily as she slipped through the building's tall, front



doors. But all that's going to change . . . now?

Will gasped as she looked around. She'd just walked into the most enormous, most intimidating reading room she'd ever seen. The shelves were so tall she could barely see where they ended. Students hunched over huge tomes were arrayed at long, heavy tables. The light was dusky, and the air was stale. The vibe was seriously serious!

A lanky boy with red hair and brown eyes (made googly by his big, round specs) sauntered by. He was wearing a baggy, orange T-shirt and jeans.

"Can I help you find anything?" he asked.

Will, feeling overwhelmed, was thankful for the boy's help. He was a librarian assistant and pointed Will to a section with books about the Middle Ages. The shelves were piled with heavy, old books. "There are so many books!" Will exclaimed.

"I think we have some others in another section. I can bring those to you if you want." the library assistant was being very nice and attentive.

"Thanks," Will said. "I really appreciate it."

Grabbing a few of the large books, Will found an open table and spread her pile of books out. She had lots of reading to do. To write a report on the Middle Ages was no small thing. The thought made Will angry. How could Mr. Collins have done this to her?

And more importantly, how come her friends weren't siding with her?

They seemed to have no use for her theory about Mr. Collins, and they hadn't even tried to stop her when she'd ditched school!

As she replayed the lunchtime scene in her head, Will felt all the elation of her afternoon with Vera begin to drain away.

Should she follow Vera's advice and break away from her friends?

Would the Council of the Congregation even allow her to? Not to mention her conscience!

And what about Matt? Should she find another crush, one who would go so far as to ask her out on an actual date?

The questions were swirling around Will's head so fast she was getting dizzy! And she didn't have a clue as to how to answer them.

Out of the corner of her eye, Will spotted

the library assistant loping towards her. His skinny arms were straining under a stack of leather-bound books.

I never thought I'd be so glad to see that much reading heading my way, Will thought with a sigh. But I really need the distraction.

Thudddd!

Will jumped as the boy dumped the pile of books onto the table. Proudly, the lanky guy showed Will what he'd found.

"Life in the Middle Ages," he said, pointing to the first heavy volume in front of Will. "*People of the Dark Years.* And so on and so forth. Everything you need."

Everything? Will thought as she heaved the heavy books onto the table in front of her. Not even close. But . . . first things first. I'll deal with Mr. Collins's report, and *then* I'll sort out the rest of my life.

As Will opened *People of the Dark Years,* she realised the boy was still standing there.

"We're closing in three hours," he said. "Are you sure you can manage to read all that?"

"No," Will admitted. "But I can try! Thanks for finding these books!"

"Well, it's my job," the boy said, stuffing

his hands into his pockets and giving Will a sheepish grin. "And I've got a lot of time to spare. . ."

Will smiled politely, then focused on her book.

I wish *I* had a lot of time, Will muttered to herself as she scanned the first lines of the text. All these books, she thought with a sigh. Some problems obviously can't be solved with magic.

She was soon immersed in her reading. She found a juicy-looking section called "The Landowner and the Serf: A Vicious Disparity." A woodcut illustration above the chapter heading depicted a plump nobleman, wearing puffed sleeves and gnawing on a turkey leg. He was snarling at a group of scrawny workers clustered around his feet.

In Will's mind, the gentleman's fleshy face turned blue. His hair was replaced by rocklike lumps. And the serfs, in their rough, woolen tunics grew green tails and forked tongues that flicked at the air nervously.

"*Rich and poor have never been further apart,*" Will read in a whisper, "*than they were in the Dark Ages.*"

Or, Will realised with sudden clarity, than they are in –

"Metamoor!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet with excitement over her discovery.

"Shhhhh!" scolded a bearded scholar hunched over a book nearby.

"Ooops," Will said in a loud whisper before clapping a hand over her mouth. "Sorry!"

Will sat back down and began flipping through the book eagerly. She skimmed the chapters on the Middle Ages' rough, thatched-roof architecture and on the domestic drudgery prevalent during the period. A picture showed a village square bustling with peasants in long, brown robes. Many of them stood around a crude stone well waiting patiently for water.

It's all there, Will said to herself in wonder. This is just the kind of thing I saw in Metamoor. The people who live there have these incredibly difficult lives, while Prince Phobos has all the power.

Even as a pang of sympathy stabbed her, Will felt a burst of happiness.

"Well!" she whispered. "This'll make my report loads easier. I can read some of these books. Then I'll add details from my personal

experience in Metamoor. Yes!"

Will grabbed her bag off the floor and dug inside it for a notebook and pen. She was ready to write!

Oh, she thought as her hand grazed a small, heavy gadget at the bottom of her bag. I'd better turn off my cell phone before I start working.

Will pulled out the phone. But when she reached for the OFF button, she saw that the cell's little screen was already a blank, slate grey.

Huh, Will thought. I don't remember turning this off earlier.

She flashed back on her hectic afternoon, feeling a guilty twinge as she remembered her mother's instructions on the answering machine: "I'll be late again tonight. . . Keep your cell phone on."

Some impish side of herself must have turned the phone off just to snub her mum.

Well . . . so what? Will thought sullenly. Is it a crime to want to focus on my homework? Mum should be nothing but happy about that.

Then Will imagined her friends. They'd be getting out of school about now. Perhaps they

were headed to one of their houses after school. And they weren't missing her at all.

Feeling the corners of her mouth tugging downward, Will tossed the phone back into her bag. She hunched over her book and squinted at the crowded text.

Just focus on showing Mr. Collins what you're capable of, Will ordered herself. And forget about the phone. Nobody wants to call me, anyway.

NINE

As Irma walked down a Heatherfield sidewalk with her friends – well, all of her friends except Will – she sighed happily. She was *loving* this mission.

First of all, school was out. And Irma was *always* happiest when school was out.

Actually, it would have been even nicer if this mission had demanded that the girls *skip* school altogether. Then Irma could have totally missed that disgusting biology lesson. Was there some law that biology teachers had to gross their students out as much as humanly possible?

Like I really need to know what the inside of a worm looks like, Irma thought. Much less what a worm's innards *smell* like.

She could also have avoided that moment of humiliation between fifth and sixth periods. She'd been talking to Hay Lin when she'd noticed her friend's eyes traveling again and again to her chin.

"What?" Irma had finally demanded.

"Oh, it's nothing. . ." Hay Lin had said slyly. "Just a mountain-sized spot on your chin is all."

"What?" Irma had screeched in panic. "Why didn't you say something earlier? Now I don't have time to go to the bathroom to deploy my emergency zit kit!"

"Just do it here," Hay Lin had offered apologetically. "I'll shield you from the prying eyes of the masses."

So Irma had crouched down against the wall while Hay Lin stood in front of her. She'd pulled a makeup bag out of her backpack and begun slathering on elements of her get-rid-of-zits-quick formula. She'd started with astringent. Then she'd applied zit cream. Next had come the cover-up stick and, finally, a light dusting of powder.

The masking method never failed Irma. And neither did Hay Lin – usually!

The thing was, Hay Lin was really skinny.

There was only so much blockage her little body was capable of. Which was why, somewhere between the zit goo and the cover-up stick, Irma was noticed, by Sergei Glickov – one of Sheffield's adorable older Infielders

Peering around Hay Lin, the boy had frowned in confusion at Irma's giant zit.

"I do not understand," he had said. "What happened to you, Irma?"

Aaaiggh! Irma cringed at the memory of it. Yes, skipping school would have been better than that!

Skipping school would also have been a tremendous risk. Especially for Irma. Her dad was a police sergeant and as gruff as a bear. If Irma had ever been caught doing something really bad, like ditching school or maybe breaking and entering – another new hobby she'd taken up since becoming a Guardian – Dad's claws definitely would have come out. Irma would have been more than grounded. She'd probably have been chained to the bedpost for a month with no escape.

We're talking no sweets or superlong baths, Irma thought with a shudder. If there w a s

anything in this world Irma loved more than hanging with her friends and flirting with boys, it was soaking in a long, hot bath. Preferably with a dish of candy or cookies teetering on the tub's edge.

Speaking of which . . . Irma returned to the present. And to the Guardians' mission. And to the reason she was so psyched about it.

The girls were *not* about to plunge through a scary and, no doubt, gross portal. They were not going to battle some lumpy blue troll or be accosted by some slithery snake.

No. They were going to eat cookies and sip tea, all the while scrutinising their host – Mrs. Rudolph. Irma just *knew* that that lady had some tricks up her sleeve. She didn't care how sweet and plump Mrs. Rudolph was. Maths teachers couldn't be trusted – especially maths teachers with inner monsters.

That's actually kinda redundant, when you think about it, Irma thought with a snort of laughter.

"Shhhhh," Taranee reprimanded Irma loudly. "I'm trying to call Will."

Irma gulped back her giggle and looked around in surprise. While she'd been distracted –

what with all the cringing and daydreaming – the four Guardians had arrived at their destination. They were standing across the street from Mrs. Rudolph's sizable, pink house. Taranee was in a phone booth, getting ready to call Will.

As soon as the friend made it over there, they'd be ready to go face the maths teacher.

Monster, Irma corrected herself. Or, say, Mathsster. Moncher?

Irma felt another round of giggles coming on. She covered her mouth as Taranee dialed Will's cell phone number.

After a long pause, Taranee shook her head and hung up the phone.

"I got that annoying message," Taranee reported with a worried frown. "'The subscriber you have dialed cannot be reached. Please try again later.'"

Irma gulped. Was Will holding a grudge about their disagreement at lunch?

She shouldn't be, Irma thought with a shrug. That was, like, two whole traumas ago, by my count. But maybe Will's feeling differently.

For the first time on this mission, a trickle

of fear crawled into Irma's gut. It hadn't occurred to her that Will might not be joining them for snacking with and spying on Mrs. Rudolph.

Something else struck Irma for the first time. What would the Guardians do if Will dropped out of W.i.t.c.h. altogether? Could they go on? How would they co –

"Did it ever cross your minds," Cornelia suddenly asked, "that Will could possibly be dispensable?"

Oh, yes, Irma thought drily. Whatever was I worried about? The minute Will steps out of the spotlight, Cornelia "Control Freak" Hale is happy to step in and take over.

She'll have to get past me first! Irma thought with a sly grin.

"Listen to me, Corny," she said, stomping over to Cornelia, who was standing on the curb looking sulky. She had purposely used a nickname that Cornelia did not like. "Without Will, I'm not going into that house."

She looked to her other friends for nods of support. But Taranee was still staring at the pay phone. And Hay Lin was completely out of it. She was gazing at Mrs. Rudolph's house

across the street, a thoughtful frown darkening her usually sunny face.

Well, Irma thought, I guess I'll take Corny on alone. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Irma loved a good battle of wits with Cornelia. That was because *Irma* always won – or, at least, got the most laughs!

Cornelia sneered at Irma.

"First of all," Cornelia told Irma, "we are perfectly capable of meeting Mrs. Rudolph by ourselves. And second – don't call me Corny!"

"What?" Irma sputtered, glancing over at Taranee and Hay Lin with a laugh. Hay Lin was still ignoring her. She was writing something on her palm with her favourite purple Magic Marker.

"It's impossible for me to stop making up nicknames for you," Irma said, turning around to face Cornelia. "That'd be like telling Hay Lin not to write on her hand anymore. You can't break lifelong habits."

"By the way," Taranee said, stepping up to Hay Lin and trying to peer over her shoulder. "What *is* she writing on her hand?"

Hay Lin finished scribbling a lengthy

phrase on her palm. She cast an exaggerated look to her left. And a furtive glance to her right. Then she thrust her hand out dramatically to Taranee.

Irma left Cornelia fuming and bounded over to Taranee. Together, they squinted at Hay Lin's slightly sweaty scrawl.

"*They make us reserve . . . ?*" Irma read haltingly.

"No," Taranee said, grabbing Hay Lin's hand away from Irma. "It's something like: *Where is . . . someone?* or – "

"Hello!" Hay Lin grunted between clenched teeth. "I was *trying* to be discreet here. But since that isn't happening, I'll just go ahead and say it out loud. There is someone watching us!" Her voice sounded shaky.

"Oh!" Irma said, giving Hay Lin's palm another read. "You're right. That *is* what it says. I don't know why I didn't see that from the begin – "

Suddenly, Hay Lin's meaning actually sank in. Following her friends' alarmed gazes, Irma looked into Mrs. Rudolph's front window. The woman was indeed watching them. And smil-

ing and waving! She motioned to the girls to come inside.

Irma gulped. Then, with her friends, she began to walk across the street to Mrs. Rudolph's imposing, wrought-iron gate.

Will or no Will, Irma thought frantically, we're trapped. There's no getting out of our visit with Mrs. Rudolph. Oh, I'm *dreading* this mission. . .

Five minutes later, the Guardians were perched uncomfortably in Mrs. Rudolph's formal front parlour. Taranee, Hay Lin, and Cornelia were framed by the dramatically high back of a red velvet sofa, while Irma was perched next to them in a tweed chair. Mrs. Rudolph sat in a straight-backed chair opposite Irma. On the coffee table between Mrs. Rudolph and the girls rested two platters piled high with cookies and cream puffs. There was also a full tea service, with cream-and-gold cups and saucers.

Gee, Irma thought, fingering the lacy doily on the arm of her chair. Metamoorian monsters sure have fussy taste. Right down to their

dainty china and fancy treats.

She was just reaching for her little cup when it began floating in the air!

All five of the cups, along with their saucers, began levitating off the coffee table! They were quickly followed by the steaming teapot. All on its own, the pot neatly poured jasmine-scented tea into every cup. Next, a set of silver tongs drifted around, depositing lumps of sugar into the cups. It plunked two into Irma's before the cup floated into her stunned hands.

"I had a feeling you liked your tea sweet," Mrs. Rudolph said to Irma with a smile. "Do you take milk, too?"

Irma merely shook her head dumbly. Meanwhile, Cornelia gaped at their serene-looking host.

"I guess it's safe to say you have powers, Mrs. Rudolph," she gasped. She ducked as the teapot swooped just a bit too close to her button nose.

"Making cups and spoons levitate isn't a power," Mrs. Rudolph scoffed. "I call it . . . a useful gift. All my fellow Metamoorians have magical capabilities. Of course," she added,

catching her own cup and saucer deftly and inhaling her tea's fragrance. "Our magic is nothing compared to yours."

Irma took a sip of tea as the girls digested that sobering fact. Then she spoke up: "Why did you invite us here? Do you have anything to tell us?"

"The last time we met," Mrs. Rudolph recalled, "I was hiding in Metamoor's underground. Wandering about those dark places, I had a chance to meet many refugees – rebels who hate Phobos."

Irma's eyes widened. Rebels living underground? Cooool!

"Some of the most resentful and well-trained rebels have presented themselves to Vathek," Mrs. Rudolph continued.

Vathek! Irma thought in alarm. That big, blue guy?

Soon after the girls had discovered they were Guardians, Vathek had provided Irma's rude introduction to the oh-so-unattractive baddies of Metamoor.

Some welcoming committee, Irma thought. Vathek snatched me and Hay Lin up in his huge, meaty paws and got ready to throw

us into a pit that led straight to the earth's core! If Will hadn't saved us, we'd have been sunk.

Feeling a pang for her missing friend, Irma returned her attention to Mrs. Rudolph.

"Vathek, as you know, is Cedric's servant," Mrs. Rudolph explained. "He's told the rebels that he's left his master, and he's offering to put his knowledge at their service. Of course, he's a pretty unreliable source!"

"But . . . what if it's the truth?" Hay Lin wondered aloud.

Mrs. Rudolph pursed her lips and paused.

Ah, a lapse in the conversation, Irma thought. An excellent opportunity to snag a cookie or three. Hmmm, I'll take this pink one with chocolate filling. Oooh, and one of those shortbreads. . .

As Irma began munching happily, Mrs. Rudolph planted her cup on the coffee table. She looked hard at the trio on the love seat.

"Let's be honest, girls," she declared. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course . . ." Taranee said, with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Sure . . ." Hay Lin said, tentatively.

"Oh . . . certainly," Cornelia piped up with a big, fake smile on her face.

"Uh-huh," Mrs. Rudolph said drily. "Then why haven't you touched the tea and cookies? Do you think they're poisoned?"

Irma stopped in mid-bite.

She painfully swallowed her mouthful of cookie.

Then she glanced over at her friends. Each of them was cradling a brimming cup of tea. And their laps? They were completely crumbless.

Boycotting the goodies, Irma thought, cringing. Smart move. I wish I'd thought of that. But since it's obviously too late . . .

"Uh . . ." Irma spoke up with wide eyes. "They *aren't* poisoned, are they?"

A voice jangled in Irma's head. But it wasn't Mrs. Rudolph's answer.

Uh-oh, Irma thought in a panic. Is this the poison taking effect? Am I hearing the voices of angels?

Tell me, Irma! Weren't you the one who was afraid of Mrs. Rudolph?

Oh. That was no angel. That was just Taranee, speaking to Irma via telepathy.

Irma did a quick poison scan. She wiggled

her fingers. No numbness. She blinked her eyes. Her vision was totally nonblurry. She wag-gled her tongue. No swellage there!

She was A-OK!

So, now, she could answer Taranee with her own thoughts.

Well, yeah, she said sheepishly. *But these cookies are clearly harmless.*

"Yes, they are, in fact," Mrs. Rudolph said, grabbing the cookie plate off the coffee table and passing it to Taranee. "Why don't you try a coconut one, dear? They're delicious!"

"What?" Taranee gasped. "You can read our thoughts?"

Again, Mrs. Rudolph merely flashed a cryptic smile.

Suddenly, Taranee gasped and slapped her forehead.

"But this morning, in maths class . . ."

Mrs. Rudolph waved Taranee's horror away.

"Let's talk about more serious matters," she said. "Now, you can understand how hard it is to trust Vathek. . ."

Irma and her friends nodded.

"Well, Vathek has convinced a group of

desperate rebels to try to invade earth," Mrs. Rudolph said somberly. "Tonight!"

"When, exactly?" Hay Lin gasped.

"He was going to try to recruit other rebels to join them," Mrs. Rudolph said, rising from her chair. "But the invasion is scheduled for seven P.M."

Irma looked at the grandfather clock in the parlour's corner.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "It's already five!"

Cornelia put her teacup down and jumped to her feet.

"Do you know which of the portals they'll be coming through?" she asked Mrs. Rudolph.

"No, unfortunately," Mrs. Rudolph said. "I hoped you could tell *me* that."

Hay Lin popped out of her seat as well and dashed into the foyer. When she returned, she was clutching her backpack. She flipped open the top flap and pulled out a yellowed scroll of parchment. Irma recognised the rolled document immediately. It was the beautiful, highly detailed map of Heatherfield that Hay Lin's grandmother had passed on to Hay Lin before she died. When a particular portal was gearing up for action, it sometimes showed up as a

glowing red light on the map.

"Here's the map of the portals," Hay Lin announced. "But without the Heart of Candracar . . ."

"That's right," Irma realised with regret. "The portals only glow when Will releases the Heart over the map."

Irma remembered the first time she'd witnessed that little miracle. Will had held her tightly clenched fist over the map and closed her eyes. Whorls of pink magic had seeped through Will's fingers and swirled around her body like a wonderful, cotton-candy cloak. Will's red hair had stood on end. Finally, Will had unclenched her fist with a happy gasp. Hovering over her palm in a burst of pink light had been a glass orb, cradled in an asymmetrical silver clasp. It was the Heart of Candracar.

And it was also an excellent homing device. The orb would float out of Will's reach and skim over the map until it came to a decisive rest over, say, the shell cave on the beach or Cedric's bookstore. And sure enough, when the Guardians investigated, they had discovered portals in those places.

There's no way to find them otherwise, Irma thought in despair.

Mrs. Rudolph clearly wasn't so sure of this. Neither, of course, was Cornelia. As Mrs. Rudolph led the girls into her dining room, then spread the map out on her long, mahogany table, Cornelia stared at the page defiantly.

"Let's figure this out by deduction," Mrs. Rudolph proposed. "Where in Heatherfield did you encounter Cedric?"

"In the gym," Irma said, shuddering as she once again recalled her run-in with Vathek. After Will had saved them from the blue thug, the girls had discovered that the snaky Cedric had been lurking in the shadows. He'd been the one who'd ordered Vathek to harm them.

"But, when we saw him there," Irma added, "we closed that portal after we broke free of Vathek."

"Wait!" Taranee exclaimed suddenly. "The bookshop! After all, Cedric owned it."

"Yes," Mrs. Rudolph agreed. "It's the perfect place for the rebels to make their passage."

Cornelia pumped her fist in the air.

"So, let's go," she declared to her friends.

"There's no time to lose!"

"Just a moment, Cornelia," Irma said. She walked around the dining room table to stand between Taranee and Hay Lin. She wanted to take on their rebellious blonde as part of a united front.

"To face an entire army," she declared, "we need Will. You *know* this."

This time, Taranee was on her side.

"I agree with Irma," she said. "We've got to track Will down."

Hay Lin nodded vigorously.

Irma gazed at Cornelia in triumph. As she'd said – she always won their skirmishes.

And as usual, Cornelia wasn't exactly gracious in her defeat. She was rather annoyed, but nodded reluctantly.

"All right," she sighed. "Let's split up and find her. But with or without Will, we meet up in front of Cedric's bookstore at six-thirty tonight. That will give us just enough time to face . . . the rebels!"

TEN

Will rode her bike home from the library on a cloud of triumph. Her report rocked! Her quick research on the politics of the Middle Ages, as well as all of the sights, smells, and gloomy feelings she'd absorbed during her visits to Metamoor – all were in there. In thirty heavy pages, to be exact!

Will knew she should worry more about the quality of her writing than the quantity, but, hey, she'd never written a thirty-page report before. She felt like a supergirl.

Of course, Will thought with a giggle, maybe that's my magical powers talking.

As she turned in to the parking lot of her building, though, Will's smile faded.

Uh-oh, she thought. Mum's car is

here. She must have gotten home early! By now, I bet Mr. Collins has had time to leave her a voice mail about my out-of-school adventure today.

Will clamped her little rubber-frog key chain between her teeth as she negotiated her bike in to the rack in front of her building. She headed for the front door. She'd almost reached it when she saw something that stopped her in her tracks.

Was it a blue, lumpish creature, ready to pound her?

Cedric the snake-man? Phobos the pillager?

No. It was a green hatchback with a pinecone-shaped air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror.

Okay, Will thought, feeling dread settle into her stomach like sour milk. I guess it's a pretty safe bet that Mr. Collins has ratted me out to Mum. That's his car! He's here!

With a heavy sigh, Will trudged into the building. She ignored the open elevator doors and took the stairs. She didn't want to arrive home any sooner than she had to.

Reaching her floor, Will walked down the hall reluctantly. She eyed her apartment

door, a wary expression on her face.

Behind that door lurked . . . Mr. Collins.

Ugh, Will thought, jangling her key chain in agitation. Who knows what kind of lies he's told my mother about me?

She was just about to turn her key in the lock when, suddenly, she heard those very lies coming through the door. Well, she heard Mr. Collins's voice, anyway. And then she heard her own name!

He *is* talking about me, Will fumed silently. That totally gives me the right to eavesdrop, for, say . . . thirty seconds.

Will pressed her ear to the keyhole and tried to home in on Mr. Collins's voice. It sounded murky through the thick, metal door. But she could just make out what he was saying.

"Will's a smart girl," Mr. Collins declared. "Very sensitive and intelligent."

Will paused. Was Mr. Collins actually . . . defending her? After the way he'd bullied her in class today? He must have been buttering up her mum, she thought.

And now, Mum was answering. Her stern voice sounded distinctly unmoved.

"Don't dissuade me, Dean," she insisted. "I have to punish her. She skipped school!"

"Come on, Susan," Mr. Collins cajoled. "Will doesn't act impulsively. She must have had a good reason."

"Well . . ." Mum was hesitating. Will could just picture her mother's face, set in a stubborn frown, her arms crossed over her chest.

". . . Will could have at least left her cell phone on," Mum complained.

That's it, Mum, Will thought, rolling her eyes. If at first you don't find something legit to pin on me, try, try again!

"What worries me," Mum continued, "is not knowing where she is."

I'll take care of that, Will thought darkly. She suddenly twisted her key in the lock. The door opened with a loud, echoing *clack*. Will sidled through the door with her eyes downcast. One quick glance confirmed Will's fears. Her mother was pacing the length of the loft with her arms folded. Mr. Collins sat on the edge of one of the red chairs, a troubled look on his face.

At Will's entrance, her mum stopped pacing. She gave her daughter a withering look,

then gazed over at Mr. Collins.

"You talk to her, Dean," she said. "I don't even know how to react right now."

But before Mr. Collins could say anything, Will herself spoke up.

"Forgive me, Mother," she said with heavy formality. "There really isn't much to say."

No, Will thought angrily. I'll let my *work* speak for me.

Reaching into her bag, Will pulled out the heavy sheaf of papers that constituted her report. Then she marched over to Mr. Collins and shoved the report into his hands.

Without glancing at her mother, Will turned on her heel and headed straight back towards the door.

"I'll be going to the swimming pool, now," she declared. "See you."

Slam!

Will found herself standing outside the loft door, breathing hard.

"Whew!" she whispered incredulously. "I did it! I totally stuck it to my mum! I'm surprised she didn't follow me. She can be such a hothead."

Will was just getting ready to rush down

the hall when she heard Mr. Collins' voice echoing through the door once again. Pressing her ear to the door, she heard him say, "It's a report on the life of people living in the Middle Ages. About thirty pages!"

Let's hear it for quantity, Will cheered inwardly. She couldn't help but feel a zing of pride at how impressed Mr. Collins sounded.

"What is this about?" Will heard her mum asking.

"I don't know," Mr. Collins replied. "But it looks excellent!"

He doesn't know? Will thought indignantly. I guess it's easy for him to forget about assignments he hands out without a thought. *He* doesn't have to spend hours in a creepy library completing them.

Her mum was speaking again.

"Excellent," she repeated drily. "Well, that makes sense. Will's such a hothead, after all."

Hothead! Will thought. Me! Oh, that's just perfect. She should look in the mirro –

"Okay, then," Mr. Collins said behind the door, interrupting Will's silent rant. "She reminds me of someone I know."

Will clapped a surprised hand over her mouth.

That's the first time Mr. Collins and I have ever agreed on anything, she thought grimly. But that doesn't mean I like him, or anything.

With a curt nod to no one, Will strode to the elevator. As she stepped into the closet-sized elevator, she glanced back at her apartment door. She pictured her mother, a few hours from now, pacing the floor and wondering where she'd gone.

Well . . . maybe I've pushed things far enough, Will admitted to herself. I'll just turn on my cell phone. It's not *really* for Mum's benefit. After all, I might want to make a call. . .

As she pushed the elevator's lobby button, Will fished around in her messy gym bag for her cell phone. But when she pulled it out and hit the ON button, she was shocked to see that the screen remained grey and blank.

It's dead? Will thought. I charged the battery last night. It should have hours left in it.

Suddenly, Will remembered her favourite power – her ability to talk to electronic appliances! She'd had a running dialogue going with her refrigerator, TV, computer, and printer for a while, now. Why not try it with her cell phone? She'd just *ask* it what happened.

"Uh, hello? Cell?" Will said to her phone.

Sure enough, the gadget's screen went neon green, and a little battery symbol – indicating that the battery was drained – popped up. Then a nasal voice that reminded Will of the phone operators in old movies spoke.

"What do you want? What do you want?" the phone demanded.

Will grinned.

"Enough with the echo," she admonished the phone. "This isn't three-way calling!"

"Only because I'm outdated," the phone groused. "Another generation younger and I could have had a built-in camera."

Will laughed, just as the elevator doors opened. She sauntered into the lobby and was about to ask her question when the phone came on again.

"And anyway," it said. "You should have more respect for me. Am I not your substitute mother, after all?"

"C'mon," Will said cajolingly. She'd learned that all her appliances responded best to a placating tone. "Don't get all ruffled. Just tell me why your battery's dead, please."

"Ask your friend," the cell phone snapped back at her in irritation. "*She* was the one who switched me off."

"Wait a minute," Will said. "What friend are you talking about?"

The cell phone uttered a name.

And Will felt her head begin to spin.

"What?" she squeaked. "But . . . that's impossible!"

Yeah, like monsters and alternate universes and teenagers with wings are impossible, Will thought. Just like the idea that I can trust *anyone* is impossible.

Will stumbled outside. Her vision was blurred by tears of hurt; her head was buzzing with incredulity.

All she wanted to do was slump down onto the curb, bury her face in her arms, and sob away all the rotten revelations of the last few hours.

But instead . . . she got mad.

A short bike ride later, at precisely six P.M., Will stalked into the Sheffield swimming center. It was eerily quiet but for the gentle *thwup-thwup-thwup* of water licking the sides of the pool. All

the student swimmers seemed to have gone home.

Normally, Will would have found the empty body of blue water irresistible. She would have stripped down immediately to her bathing suit and dived in for a round of blissfully unobstructed laps.

But this evening, she barely saw the water. She had eyes only for the slender woman with the long, blonde ponytail returning a life preserver and kickboard to the bin of accessories at the pool's far end.

"Vera!" Will barked. She planted her feet at the edge of the deep end and watched Vera straighten up and turn around. The coach walked to the edge of the shallow end, directly opposite Will. Fifty meters of chlorine-scented water separated them, but the building's curved ceiling carried their voices easily.

"Are you busy?" Will asked her coach.

"No, Will," Vera replied with a smile. "In fact, I was just looking for you. Why aren't you wearing your swimsuit yet?"

"Let me ask *you* a question," Will countered. "Why isn't anybody here?"

"I've convinced the pool directors to give

you some free time," Vera replied. "At least three hours' worth."

"All for me?" Will said skeptically. Her hands tightened into fists. That was when she realised that she was still clutching her cell phone in her left hand. She hadn't even realised she'd been holding on to it on the bike ride over.

Thinking about the dishonest act that had caused her phone to end up without batteries, Will turned sly herself.

"You have a lot of power, don't you, Vera?" she asked.

"Well, I'm only a trainer," Vera responded chirpily. "But they listen to me and – "

"Perhaps my question wasn't clear enough," Will interrupted. "What I meant was, What *spell* did you use to convince the directors to give us the pool?"

"I don't understand," Vera said, blinking innocently.

Will thrust her cell phone towards Vera.

"You have magical abilities!" Will announced boldly. "A little bird – my cell phone – told me!"

Vera looked very far away in the vast

swimming center. But even from this distance, Will could see the woman's face change. It went from sweet to stony in under a second.

Vera's shoulders stiffened beneath her pink sweatshirt.

Her eyes changed most of all. They became cold and grey.

"Well," Vera said drily. "You've finally figured it out. You don't know how hard that acting job was for me."

The cold flicker in Vera's eyes had been a blip compared to the shape-shifting the swimming coach was undergoing now! Her golden mane separated into two long, yellow plaits of a dull, strawlike colour.

Her body grew shorter and more angular.

Her face melted for a moment into a putty-like, nondescript mass – a blank oval on top of a stick figure.

But in the next moment, it began to regain shape. Where Vera's pert nose and plush lips had been, new features began to form – the wan, wide eyes and pointy chin of . . .

"Elyon!" Will gasped.

ELEVEN

Irma poked her head through the doors of the Sheffield swimming center and took a deep breath.

Ahhhh, she thought. A big pool of chlorinated blue stuff. Now, that's what I like to smell.

And Will Vandom! Irma thought, spotting Will standing at one end of the pool. That's what I like to *see*! I found her! Which means, not only can she lead us in battle against the rebels, but I can also totally rub my triumph in Cornelia's face!

Irma was opening her mouth to call out to her friend when something made her stop. It was Will's posture: her feet were planted as if she were about to jump out of a starting

gate. Her fists were clenched. And her jaw jutted forward in rage. She looked mad!

Clearly, something was going down!

Irma followed Will's gaze to the other end of the pool. Will was confronting that new swim coach, Vera!

That's strange, Irma thought. Will thinks Vera is the best coach. At least, that's how she's been talking about her ever since Vera arrived at Sheffield. But now, she looks ready for a catfight. Maybe they're having a disagreement over practice time or relay teams or something like that. Whatever it is, it's gonna have to wait. Metamoorian battle trumps catfight with a teacher any day.

Irma glanced at the alluring water one more time as she got ready to summon Will.

But then, something *else* made her stop.

The water just beyond Vera's toes was swirling! And wafting out of that sudden whirlpool were silvery wisps of magic!

Was Vera from Metamoor, too?

Who next? Irma thought in despair. My mailman? The clerk at the Quickie Mart on the corner?

Irma dragged her eyes away from the

swirling water to glance at Vera's face. Had it mutated into a fleshy mask of scales and horns, like Mrs. Rudolph's? Perhaps Vera had turned blue and lumpy. Or maybe she looked like . . .

Elyon! Irma gasped. While Irma had been transfixed by the magic in the water, Vera had changed into the Guardians' pigtailed nemesis.

And Will was *not* happy about it.

"How were you able to change your appearance?" she demanded of Elyon.

"Cedric is a good teacher," Elyon replied with a mischievous grin. "Did you finish the report he asked you to do?"

"What?" Will barked loudly. "He . . . was Mr. Collins?"

"Oh, yes," Elyon laughed. "You can't trust anybody. Now, just stay where you are. . . "

As Will braced herself for a fight, Irma felt a stab of guilt. Mr. Collins *had* been an impostor! That was why Will had had that dizzy spell when she'd walked by his desk. Irma and the others should have believed her!

But why hadn't Will grown faint around Vera if Vera had actually been Elyon?

It must be because Elyon was Will's – and our – friend, Irma thought with an angry grimace.

As Irma brooded, she saw something out of the corner of her eye. Elyon was motioning towards the water. And it was responding like an obedient dog. Make that an obedient . . . sea serpent! The water was arranging itself into a long snake that was slowly undulating out of the water.

Irma glanced quickly at Will.

She felt the blood drain from her face.

Will hadn't even noticed the water snake! She had been too busy staring malevolently at Elyon's eyes.

"Just tell me one thing," she demanded of Elyon. "Why?"

"I don't know everything," Elyon hurled back. She dropped her hands to her sides sulkily and added, "It's Cedric's plan. And I trust him. My only mission was to hold you back, fair and square. But since you have now discovered me . . ."

Elyon's eyes narrowed and she lifted her hands again.

". . . I'll have to resort to *not*-so-fair

means," she said, by way of finishing.

Cupping her palms and pointing her hands upward, Elyon motioned towards the water, drawing it up, up, up out of the pool.

And making it bigger, bigger, bigger!

There was no way Will could miss the water snake now! It was as tall as a rearing dragon, and just as vicious!

"Yah!" Elyon exhorted the snake, throwing her arms into the air.

Irma spotted Will through the serpent's watery coils. Will stared at the writhing creature in disbelief. By that point, it had begun to undulate all over the pool. While its long body bucked towards the ceiling and came dangerously close to the windows, its head made its way straight towards Will!

And how was Will reacting? In a way *only* another Guardian could have predicted. Instead of screaming or running or flailing at the snake with her fists, Will clenched her right hand in front of her, then closed her eyes. Wisps of pink magic began to break through from between her fingers.

She's summoning the Heart of Candracar, Irma realised. She's going to transform her-

self into a winged superhero and totally kick that snake's butt! If, uh, snakes have butts, that is. Hmmm, maybe I *should* start paying closer attention in bio – oh, *no*!

While Will had been summoning her magical alter ego and Irma was musing about snakes' bodies, the water serpent had simply taken action! It snatched Will up in its watery coils. Now it flung her back and forth in the air as if she was nothing more than a toy.

"Aaaaagh!" Will screamed down at Elyon. "Get this thing off me!"

Elyon responded by grinning – and shaking her head.

That's it, Irma thought, rolling up her sleeves. Time to make my entrance.

Stepping over to the edge of the pool, Irma yelled, "Elyon can't hear you, Will. Perhaps she's got water in her ears!"

"Irma?" Elyon called with a scowl.

Irma merely smirked at her foe. Then she raised her own arms and summoned up her magic. Immediately, blue swirls began emanating from her fingertips.

"What do you know?" she quipped to Elyon. "I have the power of water! Which

means, it's time to return our water snake to its cage!"

Irma steeled her shoulders for a fight and pointed at the slimy serpent.

"Enough!" Irma yelled. "Put her down!"

Then she gasped. It had worked! The water snake was obeying her orders!

But as the snake's topmost coil – the one in which Will was ensnared – began hurtling downward, Irma slapped her forehead in frustration.

"I should have told it to put Will down *gently,*" she cried in chagrin.

"Whooo-AAAAAHHHHH!" Will screeched. Now that the snake had released her, she was skimming down its coils as if she were riding a death-defying waterslide!

The snake collapsed into its former state – a mere mass of water. And Will was enfolded in the cascade! A bubble bounced her to the right. A swirl batted her to the left.

Finally, she plunged into the pool, shrieking all the way. She landed with a *thwack* and a gargantuan splash.

Irma threw her hands over her head and cringed.

"Thank goodness Will is a good swimmer,"

she whispered to herself fearfully. "At least, I think she is!"

As the snake disappeared entirely, Irma scanned the pool's choppy surface for her friend.

There she was! Will's head had just popped out of the water, gasping for breath. She began to swim energetically towards Irma.

Okay, Irma thought, Will's done her job – she's survived. Now it's time for me to do mine – trouncing Elyon!

"We're down to a face-off," Irma declared to Elyon, who still stood on the opposite side of the pool, looking smug. "Just you and me, Elyon!"

"Don't count on it, Irma," Elyon spat. New silvery swirls began to form around her like a cloak of clouds. "But don't worry. We'll see each other soon."

Elyon started to grow transparent! A moment later, she evaporated into thin air.

"She's disappeared!" Irma cried in despair.

Will pulled herself over to the swimming-pool wall and turned around. She gazed at the empty spot where Elyon had stood only a second ago.

"She must have teletransported herself," Will gasped. She was still coughing up mouthfuls of water after her ordeal with the snake.

"Here," Irma said, reaching down to help Will out of the pool.

Will grabbed her hand and hauled herself out of the water.

"I had no idea Elyon could be that powerful," Will breathed, slumping at the pool's edge. "Even if Cedric *is* her mentor."

Irma could only nod. It seemed as though Elyon was getting more powerful with every visitation! And more scary!

While Irma quietly freaked, Will caught her breath and began squeezing the moisture out of her hair. Then she flashed Irma a grateful look.

"Thanks for the save," she said. "Even if that dive was, uh, less than fun. How did you guess that I was here?"

Irma shrugged.

"We have this in common," she said, gesturing at the pool. "This is your favourite place, and it's also the most obvious place for *me* to look for you!"

Will's next question was unspoken, but Irma could see it in her still-hurt brown eyes: And why were you looking for me, Irma? To apologise? To eat crow? Or to give me more bad news about our war with the Metamoorian baddies?

Unfortunately, the answer was number three.

Irma bit her lip and said, "We've got to start walking, now! We've got a long way to go and not much time. So hurry up, and I'll explain everything on the road."

TWELVE

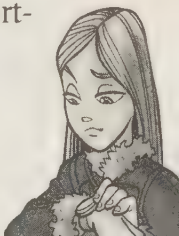
Cornelia paced back and forth in front of Cedric's bookshop. She looked at her watch for about the twelfth time in three minutes.

The first time she'd looked, it had been six-twenty-seven.

Which meant it was now six-thirty – the time Cornelia had insisted all the Guardians gather.

But only she, Hay Lin, and Taranee were there.

"Well," Cornelia said, dragging her gaze away from her watch face to regard her friends. They were huddled together on a bus stop bench on the sidewalk. They looked pale and worried. "We have no choice but to get started. There's no sign of the others."



"Great," Hay Lin sighed. "Now it's not just Will who's missing. Irma's gone, too! What should we do, Cornelia?"

Cornelia froze. Hay Lin was gazing at her with a mixture of fear, admiration, and urgent need. It was a look that lately had been reserved solely for Will – the group's leader.

Now that Hay Lin was giving *her* that look, Cornelia had to admit it to herself – it didn't feel as great as she'd expected it to.

"I don't know what we should do," she moaned, putting a hand to her forehead. "Leave me alone for a minute. I've got to think."

Willing her mind to kick into gear only made it go rebelliously blank. Cornelia frowned in frustration.

Why can't decisions, she thought, just fall from the sky?

Claannnnnggggg!

Well what do you know? – something had just fallen from the sky!

Cornelia jumped as that something crashed into a lamppost only a couple of feet away from her. Then it hurtled to the sidewalk, landing with a sickening crunch.

Cornelia gaped at the object as it shuddered to a halt. It was . . . a bicycle! A red bicycle with a yellow seat. It looked familiar. . .

Cornelia glanced up at the top of the lamppost. Sure enough, the bike's owner – Will – was clinging to the pillar with all four limbs. She was breathing hard and hanging on tightly with all of her strength.

Just below her, already beginning to grin and giggle, was Irma.

"Will! Irma!" Cornelia shrieked. Hay Lin and Taranee had jumped to their feet and run over to join her. "How did you get here?"

"Well . . ." Irma said, with a sheepish shrug. "Witches use brooms to fly. I thought we'd use a bike! The landing was a toughie, though!"

Will merely added, *"Aaaaccchooo!"*

"Will is all wet," Irma added, shinnying down the lamppost and hopping over to the other Guardians. Slowly, Will slid down the lamppost after her.

"During the flight over here," Irma explained, "she definitely – "

" – Caught a cold," Will cried, with an unhappy sniff.

Cornelia gaped at Will. And then she

started to laugh! She didn't know if it was relief at having their leader back in their midst or amusement at the thought of Irma and Will careening through the skies on a red bike. Whatever it was, it felt good!

Taranee and Hay Lin quickly joined in. Meanwhile, Irma said to Will guiltily, "The end justifies the means."

Will nodded ruefully.

Which made Cornelia realise just what a good team member Will was. She was ready to do her duty – and battle at her friend's side – no matter what kind of ache she was still feeling after the whole lunch hour run-in.

If that didn't make Will a leader of their haphazard little family, Cornelia didn't know what did. And it was time to swallow her pride and say so to Will.

She stepped forward, swallowing hard, and put a hand on Will's shoulder.

"Will," she said apologetically. "I – "

"Let's have our talk after this," Will said quickly. But she did give Cornelia an understanding, forgiving look. "And while we're at it, I think we have to forgo an elaborate plan of action. There's no time. We simply have to trust

our powers." She looked at them knowingly.

Will closed her eyes. Cornelia followed suit. She knew what was coming. Will's body would contort itself as magic surged through her muscles, her veins, even her heart! And when she opened her palm, another heart would be floating above it – the Heart of Candracar.

"Cornelia!" Will called out. "Earth!"

Cornelia's eyes flew open in time to see Will send a teardrop of concentrated green magic from the Heart of Candracar straight towards her. The droplet swirled around Cornelia as she felt its power suffuse her own veins and every muscle.

Cornelia's body contracted. She felt her arms and legs growing longer and stronger. Her hair was growing, too. And she knew her face was becoming more angular, more grown-up and more knowing. Best of all, her green skirt and practical brown jacket were falling away, to be replaced by a sweeping purple skirt, a midriff-baring, off-the-shoulder top, and a pair of fluttering, iridescent wings.

As Cornelia was transformed, Will sent a watery, blue teardrop to Irma, a fiery one to

Taranee, and a silver bundle of air to Hay Lin. Then she let the Heart's pink energy envelop her own body.

Within seconds, the girls had become Guardians – smart, beautiful, and powerful.

Emphasis on the powerful, Cornelia thought. Will had just stepped up to the bookshop's door – which mostly consisted of a cloudy glass window. After trying the antique brass doorknob and finding the door locked, she'd tapped the glass with her fist. The single blow had shattered the window, sending shards flying.

"What an entrance!" Hay Lin said as the Guardians stepped through the window into the dark and dusty bookstore. "Are you sure we should just barge in like this?"

"Hey," Will said with a grin. "The mat on the front step says 'Welcome,' doesn't it?"

"As do I," said a thin, but sinister, voice in the back of the store. It was a voice Cornelia knew well.

Elyon!

En masse, the Guardians stumbled farther into the shop, peering back into the gloom. Cornelia saw a flash of blonde hair. There she

was! Elyon was peeking through the back office door at the Guardians, grinning at them mischievously.

"Welcome," Elyon said again, sarcastically. "If you're looking for a particular book, just follow me to the back."

Then she disappeared.

"Elyon!" Cornelia huffed to her friends in frustration. "What does she have do with all this?"

"I'll explain after," Will said breathlessly. "Now we have to follow her."

Cornelia didn't have time to be annoyed that Will was in the know while she was in the dark. They had to find Elyon! The girls plunged through the office door into the back.

Well, at least now we're *all* in the dark, Cornelia thought drily.

Until, of course, Taranee created a fireball in the palm of her hand and sent it bobbling towards the ceiling. Now the girls could see, but it didn't do them much good. All they encountered was a large room, crowded with looming bookshelves. The very tall shelves were arranged tightly, to create narrow aisles. But near the door, where the girls were

standing, was a clearing of sorts. It was a square space about the size of a small apartment – with bookshelves for walls. As far as the eye could see, there were nothing but books and . . .

Wait a minute, Cornelia thought as she glanced into one corner. Was that Elyon?

She'd thought she'd seen a flash of her old friend's long, blue dress.

But before Cornelia could tell the others about the sighting, Irma cried out, "She just disappeared behind those shelves!"

Cornelia glanced at Irma. She was pointing at the opposite side of the room entirely!

"No," Hay Lin yelled, pointing to yet another corner. "She's over there."

"That's not possible," Irma insisted. "I just saw her on the other side!"

Sighing in frustration, Cornelia spun around in a circle. Elyon was playing games with them agai –

Hey! This time Cornelia *knew* she wasn't imagining it. Elyon was gazing at her from between two tall bookshelves.

"Elyon!" she cried.

But, of course, Elyon turned on her heel

and disappeared into the dark corridor.

"Wait!" Cornelia screamed, taking a few steps forward. "It's Cornelia!"

"That's not your friend anymore," Irma said, reminding Cornelia. "She's the opposite of that. And we've got to stop her!"

Cornelia felt a wave of sadness wash over her. She knew Irma was right. Elyon had *once* been her best friend, the keeper of all of Cornelia's secrets, and number one on her cell phone's speed dial. But that always smiling, boy-crazy girl seemed to have disappeared.

"If I could just speak to her," Cornelia said wistfully. "For a moment!"

"Wait," Will cut in. "Did you see where she went?"

Together, the girls pressed forward and ducked into the aisle where they'd last spotted Elyon. Taranee beckoned her fireball and the light source bobbled after them.

The aisle went only a short distance before it turned a corner to the right. Then it veered sharply to the left.

And then it split in two!

"She's led us into a trap," Will said in shock. "Or she wants to mislead us."

"Or . . ." Irma quavered, looking around. "Um, guys? Do you have the same nasty feeling that I do? That this maze of a bookshop has become . . . an actual labyrinth?"

Cornelia darted forward to peer down both sides of the divided corridor. One row of bookshelves began to curve in a seemingly endless coil. The other turned a corner. Irma was right! They were trapped inside with no way out!

"I hope this is a magic trick," Irma observed, looking up at the sky-high furniture boxing them in. "If not, just imagine how many customers get lost in this bookshop every day!"

Unngggh. Will clutched her head and let out a woozy moan.

Cornelia looked at her in alarm. Taranee grabbed Will's shoulders before she could faint.

"Is everything all right, Will?" Taranee asked in alarm.

"I'm okay," Will said, a moment later. She blinked the haziness from her eyes and shook away her dizziness. "It's my usual faint feeling. The invasion clearly has begun. I can feel it!" She steeled herself. It looked as though her

strength had returned quickly this time. And her bravery wasn't too shabby, either. She set off down the left fork and motioned to her friends.

"Follow me," she said. "I'll try to always turn east among these shelves, so we don't get too lost. Hopefully, my faintness will lead us to its source!"

Will's hope paid off too quickly. The Guardians had only to round a corner before they ran into a crowd of scaly Metamoorians, clambering through a portal. The roiling tunnel of silver magic and otherworldly vapour had erupted right in the middle of the maze's wide aisle. It hovered in the air, swirling and growling like a wild beast.

Speaking of beasts, the rebels emerging from the portal looked like Metamoor's most absolutely scruffy, warty inhabitants. Their long, medieval robes were tattered and dirty. Their scaly hands were gnarled. Their beady, red eyes looked uniformly hungry. And angry!

And no pair of eyes was more peeved than that of the big, blue thug Vathek. When the Guardians rounded the corner, he had been at the head of the group of rebels, urging them to

hurry out of the bookstore.

But, of course, the moment Cornelia and her friends made their appearance, Vathek changed his mind.

"The Guardians!" he bellowed to his motley crew. "Get them!"

Roaring with aggression, the rebels whipped swords from their belts. Some of the weapons had blades of steel. Others were tipped by crackling, lightninglike energy, which, frankly, looked a lot more sinister than steel.

"Didn't I say I wished this was a magic trick?" Irma cried. "Why couldn't I keep my big mouth shut?"

"Well, we've got some magic of our own, don't we?" Hay Lin said. "I think I'll send mine by *air* mail!"

Hay Lin levitated into the air and thrust her hands out at the invaders. A magic-tinged gust of wind hit a cluster of the Metamoorians smack in their stomachs. With a collective roar, they stumbled backward, shielding their eyes against the tremendous gust.

Cornelia balled up her own fists, readying her magic to shake the rebels. But before she

had a chance to crack open the floor or make the bookshelves collapse, Taranee gathered an armful of fire. She stopped herself, however, before she hurled it at the baddies.

"Wait – there are tons of books here," she cried. "I don't want to risk burning down the whole building!"

"Irma can wash away the fire," Will declared.

"How?" Irma asked. "I have power over water, but there are no fire hydrants here! I can't just wring the stuff out of the air!"

"Okay!" Will said, confidently changing her plan. "Forget the creatures. Let's concentrate on the portal. We have to close it at all costs."

Nodding in agreement, Cornelia joined forces with her friends. She focused on the portal, trying at the same time to keep the rebels in her peripheral vision. She didn't want any rude interruptions in the middle of performing a magic exploit!

In a few seconds, though, she realised something.

Not only were the rebels not interrupting the Guardians – they were ignoring them

completely! Instead, they were all looking at . . .

Cornelia followed the monsters' gaze.

. . . Cedric! He was standing at the end of the aisle in a flowing purple coat. His pinched, beautiful face was as smug as ever. He stared down the battling rebels and the Guardians.

Cornelia gasped.

So *that* was why Elyon was here. She was reporting to Cedric. And Cedric is . . .

"A servant of Phobos!" cried one of the monsters in a raspy howl. He pointed at Cedric in rage.

Yup, Cornelia thought. Which pretty much makes us *all* enemies here. This is getting confusing!

But not for the rebels. Suddenly, they couldn't have cared less about the Guardians.

"Catch him!" a big, floppy-eared, blue thug yelled.

Irma – who had been halfway through walloping Vathek – paused in the midst of her fisticuffs.

"What are they doing?" she demanded. "They're against Cedric?"

"Not against him," Vathek growled. "But

what he represents – years of lies. Of poverty. Of *suffering*!"

A beast with a fringe of plantlike, green hair cascading from his chin ran up to Cedric. Before the evil lord could raise his slender hands in protest – or mutate into a sinister snake, for that matter – the monster had grabbed Cedric's long, blond locks. Yanking the man's head back sharply, the rebel forced him to his knees.

"Let go of me," Cedric ordered imperiously. "In the name of your prince."

"Let 'our' prince see this," said yet another monster, stepping forward. This one had a scabby blue face, complete with a piggy snout. The horrible face was partially hidden beneath the hood of a brown cloak. But the creature's rage was palpable. While his not-so-jolly green compadre held Cedric in place, the blue guy raised his weapon. Its magic blade sparkled and crackled in the gloom of the maze.

Cornelia screamed. The monster was going to cut Cedric's head off! She couldn't watch.

But she also couldn't drag her horrified eyes away!

And she wasn't the only one!

Suddenly, Will burst from the cluster of Guardians.

"No!" she screamed.

She lunged between the rebel and Cedric, her hands outstretched. As she leapt to Cedric's aid, the Heart of Candracar erupted from her palm, shooting rays of bright-pink magic throughout the bookshop.

But the rebel had no time to react.

His sword came crashing down, slamming into the young Guardian.

"Will!" Cornelia shrieked. She felt Hay Lin clutch at her from behind while Taranee gasped in horror.

Then, an eerie, stunned silence filled the maze. Every Guardian and rebel was struck dumb by what they'd just seen.

For what they'd just seen was . . . unbelievable!

The sword had bounced off Will as if she had been made of rubber. There wasn't a scratch on her. Cedric, still crouching behind her, had not been injured.

As for Will's face, it was shocking as well. Instead of looking freaked or frightened in the

wake of her near death, she was the picture of peace. In fact, she'd thrown her head back and thrust her hands out before her. She cradled the Heart of Candracar above her palms with grace and absolute authority.

Finally, one of the monsters broke the silence. His voice was thick with awe.

"It's a miracle," he breathed.

"Yes," agreed one of his comrades. "She's still alive!"

She was more than alive. She was levitating from the floor, buoyed by the great surges of magic pouring forth from the Heart of Candracar!

As she opened her mouth to speak, every ear strained to take in her wisdom.

It was then that Cornelia knew. Will was not just a leader. She was a hero. She'd risked her own life to save that of the Guardians' sworn enemy.

And if she was able to do that, Cornelia thought in wonder, I know she'll *never* fail her own friends. That's why I'll never let hurt feelings form a wedge between us again.

Only united, Cornelia thought determinedly, can W.i.t.c.h. save the world!

The Fire of Friendship was first published in the USA in 2004 by Volo/Hyperion Books for Children
First published in Great Britain in 2005 by HarperCollins *Children's Books*, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

The Last Tear was first published in the USA in 2004 by Volo/Hyperion Books for Children
First published in Great Britain in 2005 by HarperCollins *Children's Books*, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

Illusions and Lies was first published in the USA in 2004 by Volo/Hyperion Books for Children
First published in Great Britain in 2005 by HarperCollins *Children's Books*, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

First published in a three-in-one edition in Great Britain in 2007 by HarperCollins *Children's Books*, a division of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

© 2007 Disney Enterprises, Inc.

ISBN13: 978-0-00-725423-1
ISBN10: 0-00-725423-7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced of transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information contact HarperCollins Publishers, 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB.

The HarperCollins website is:
www.harpercollinschildrensbooks.co.uk

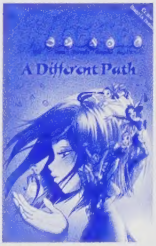
Visit www.clubwitch.co.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd. St Ives plc.

This book is proudly printed on paper which contains wood from well managed forests, certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council. For more information about FSC, please visit www.fsc-uk.org

FSC Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-1806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Now you can collect all these magical W.I.T.C.H. books



The girls of W.I.T.C.H. are facing the biggest challenges of their lives but are they prepared enough to win their biggest battles?

Elyon is still entranced by her evil brother, Prince Phobos, and is using all of her new found power to fight against her friends. But Will, Irma, Taranee, Cornelia and Hay-Lin won't give up on their best friend – even when she traps them in a painting!

And with Phobos' henchman, Cedric, turning all the girls against each other with his illusions and lies, will W.I.T.C.H. be able to come together in time before one of them is taken away forever?

KQ-177-753

FSC
Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
Cert no. SGS-COC-2061
www.fsc.org
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

£8.99
ISBN
X
2D
A
630

www.clubwitch.co.uk
© 2007 Disney Enterprises Inc. All rights reserved.